

## **The Fruit of the Spirit: Self-Control**

August 27, 2023

Galatians 5:22-24

Proverbs 25:28

Titus 2:1-6, 11-14

**Main Point:** Self-control, the last of the fruit of the Spirit, is a gift given in order to contrast the gospel-transformed life from the self-focused life. As self-control is cultivated in our lives, it produces even more fruitfulness to display God's grace to a watching world.

**SI:** 3 passages

**INTRO:** It happens in the late winter in my neighborhood, and probably you've seen it, too. It's a terrible, awful thing. It's even called murder, "Crepe Murder." You know, crepe myrtle trees that people cut off the previous years growth down to the base trunk. Why do they do this? Because they know that the tree will vigorously respond, and come summer, there will be new stems, new fruit, new blossoms, beautiful bright crepe myrtle flowers everywhere.

We come to this last fruit of the Spirit – self-control. And as we've been studying fruitfulness, now it's time for the pruning. Pruning for the sake of more fruit. Self-control is about restraining ourselves, self-discipline, even cutting off. This fruit recognizes the still present power of our self-centered, fleshly instincts to create havoc and harm if they are not denied and killed.

So self-control is self-denial. It is restraining ourselves. It is saying no to fleshly instincts, patterns, habits, and unlimited growth. But it is a fruit of the Spirit – it's something the Spirit works in us to give us more of!

The reality of the Bible – it looks our fallenness straight in the eyes and says this is bad, this is ugly, and the Spirit of Grace won't just leave it alone. Healthy, cultivated trees are trees that are regularly pruned.

So let's look at self-control – the lack of it, the fruit of it, and the grace of it – the how.

**1. The Lack of Self-Control.** First, we need to look at the lack of self-control and why the Bible talks about it so much.

This proverb is one of many places where the Bible refers to self-control, self-restraint, self-discipline.

"A man without self-control is like a city broken into and left without walls."

What happens if you don't have self-control. Observational wisdom. See it. Learn from it.

It might seem obvious – but ancient cities learned over time to make strong, thick, tall walls for protection. Everything inside could be protected. A city without walls is totally vulnerable to marauders, thieves, enemies. But this person's defenses have gone down, and the marauders have pillaged his city.

Look at it, how terrible this is!

Think of the stories you know of – the person who has given themselves over to a habit that has taken over their lives. They live for the habit. Maybe it has even become an addiction and the ravages it has done to their lives and relationships – how the lack of self-control has broken down the walls of their lives – no protection, no shield from evil and so they are sitting targets for the great Deceiver and Liar to steal, kill, and destroy.

This is what lack of restraint, lack of self-control, lack of pruning can do. Our fleshly nature is so strong that we must be killing it. Beware of indulging your fleshly instincts! You will regret giving in.

This is what Paul means when he ends here in Galatians 5 with v. 24 > those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. You **can** control yourself, you can say no to your sinful instincts, and this is serious business. Crucify them b/c in Christ, they have been crucified. If you can't control your impulses, then you may not be in Christ.

Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5:29-30), if your right eye causes you to sin, if your right hand causes you to sin, gouge it out, cut it off. The Bible's point here is to take self-control super seriously.

So let's look at the fruit:

**2. The Fruit of Self-Control.** The fruitfulness of self-control – flourishing, long-term growth

Titus is a young pastor or maybe bishop who is overseeing church plants on the island of Crete. He's setting up elders for all the churches.

And Paul calls him to command all these groups in how to live, how to demonstrate the fruit of gospel-transformed lives. And he says, teach them, urge them over and over to have self-control. Why?

Well, again. The Bible is startling to us in its realism about the fight we have against the fleshly instincts. The Bible does not ever shrink back from the fallenness of humanity and the battle against our natural instincts that rebel against godliness.

And so the Spirit gives this last fruit: the gift of self-control. Restraining our rebellious impulses, dying to our self-centeredness, putting to death uninhibitedness. We will get to the how. But before we talk about how this is cultivated, let's look at the fruitfulness of it, the beauty of it, the desirability of it.

3 ways self-control displays its fruitfulness: c – intuitive, c-cultural, attractive

It's **counter-intuitive**: Whose idea was it to cut off this perfectly bountiful branch from this tree?

This is counter-intuitive. We are talking about fruit all along, and we want fruit to grow. Fanning into flame. Nurturing, fertilizing. And now we get the opposite image. Because God is a Cultivator. A Gardener. Out of control growth prohibits fruitfulness.

ILLUS I did a dive into grape vine farmers (viticulture). Yes, the vines could grow and grow, vines trailing all over the ground. And grapes would grow. But they wouldn't be very good. There's something about pruning that makes the grapes a lot better in quality and number. So the farmers go through their vines and they cut off what looks like perfectly good growth canes.

**It's counter-cultural** – this is why it is mentioned so many times here in Paul's letter to Titus. Titus is on the island of Crete, south of Greece. And the Cretans are known throughout the Mediterranean world for their smarmy character. Like we would call them ambulance chasing lawyers, or slippery used car salesmen. But actually they were worse. Here is commentator Whitney Woollard: The people were such a lying, self-indulgent, sexually promiscuous bunch that Crete became proverbial for immorality in the ancient world. To be a "*kretizo*," a Cretan, was to be a liar. On top of that, their men, known for violence, often served as mercenary soldiers to the highest bidder while their women epitomized something called "the new Roman woman." These wealthy "emancipated" women enjoyed a greater number of privileges than their Greek counterparts. As a woman, I (Whitney) would be thrilled for women to enjoy greater liberties in society were it not for the fact that they exploited their freedoms to shirk off marriage and household responsibilities in lieu of casual sex and worldly appetites.

<https://www.whitneywoollard.com/sitecontent/a-counter-cultural-gospel-for-cretans>

So we can see how self-control would be a much needed counter-cultural character trait for the Christians on Crete. Especially for families – older men, younger men, older women, younger women. The word "train" has the same root word as self-control. Self-control models for the watching world what a God-transformed life produces.

It's counter-intuitive, counter-cultural, and **it's attractive**. This is beautiful, attractive, different. It gets noticed.

Self-control is good evidence for the benefit Christianity brings to society – if we can control ourselves, our own fleshly appetites, if we can restrain those and master them, then we can be trusted to bring good to society... Christians should be known for their self-control in the work place and at school so that people see and trust you to do good by them and for them, as well. This would be very important for the Cretan society!

And (2:4-5)– Children that are raised under an umbrella of joyful self-control are attractive. They know they are little sinners that need training and restraining. (Have you ever tried to potty-train a toddler?) Their parents, therefore, lovingly and gently and firmly set boundaries, fences for the children to feel safe and secure within. When they cross the boundaries, they encounter loving, compassionate, firm discipline. This makes them beautiful, attractive, different. It gets noticed.

What makes your children different? Well it's not me! It's God's work in and through me and through them to train them (2:4). (Train is same word as self-control).

App: I remember how sobering it was for my own parenting when I discovered that Silicon Valley engineers and executives don't let their own children have electronic devices b/c they know the science behind the way they are designed.

Watch out for your children being trained up by screens. There is a preponderance of evidence that over-indulgence in screens craters creativity and alters brain development to make us more distractable than we already are.

Self-control, self-denial is counter-cultural, and therefore strange and attractive. Self-control enables you to live in the world without being overcome by the world. To be different for the sake of the kingdom.

Self-control requires pruning – death. How could I ever give myself to this?  
The Lack of, the Fruit of,

**3. The Grace of Pruning.** How it happens.

John 15:1-2

“I am the True Vine, and My Father is the Vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit He takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit.”

How do you get self-control? By grace, by gift. Grace trains us. Training – training a vine to grow where you want it to grow and pruning off the aberrant shoots. Training to renounce this way (ungodliness and worldly passions) and go this way (self-control,

upright, godly). But we need training! Teaching. This is Titus 2:1-6. Urging, teaching, encouraging, ongoing, over and over, repetitive.

**ILLUS:** what happens when the branch gets pruned. The roots wake up. The plant says: We've been wounded. We need to send water and sugars up to the branches. The branches need more aggressive attention from us. It's like the dead need raising...  
hmm... maybe...

Same for us. When we get pruned, the roots wake up. The roots of our faith. This is the key to understanding the power of the gospel at work – v. 11- God's grace trains us to self-control, self-denial, renouncing ungodliness and worldly passions and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives. How does this grace train us? By taking us to the roots, the roots of our faith. By looking to Christ – again and again, over and over, with eyes more open, wider and wider, so you marvel more and more and you have ears to hear passages like this with ears that drool...

For those who are mourning a loss, for those who are going through a cutting off, or contemplating losing something: See the fruit that is promised – faith in the future. Look at vs. 13-14

See, look where Paul takes Titus so that he can take his people there: Cosmic level, Eternity, Heavenward, so that when the pruning happens, when crucifying the flesh is what God calls you to, you have this super-abundant fullness to look towards... He's talking about fruitfulness that takes time to appear – 'live in the present age' while 'waiting for our blessed hope, our great God and Savior Jesus Christ'

He gave Himself to purchase us, to buy us, to redeem us

To purify for Himself

For His own possession

God-centeredness, Christ focused-ness,

Leading to zealousness for good works – the overflow of being bought. This makes self-control a delight, a joy, a zealousness for holiness out of thanksgiving-filled obedience, the obedience of faith. God knows what is best for me! The world, the flesh, and the devil want to enslave me to my earthly passions and fleshly desires. God wants to mortify these – put them to death, so that His fruit can be abundantly overflowing – see? Zealous for good works. Let the Gardener prune your vines.

He is taking us back again to the roots – He nourishes the roots so that the fruit of the Spirit tree is healthy and thriving, even as it still needs pruning.

Receive the pruning as gift, not as punishment. As restorative discipline, not as punitive shaming.

This is how you know, again, that this is supernatural – you are controlling yourself out of joy from receiving grace, not out of selfishly derived sin-management techniques.

\*Self-control can be for you, for you alone, to get an advantage, to gain something for yourself. This is self-control driven by the flesh, by sheer willpower. And the difference is in the why. Why are you engaging in self-pruning? For yourself? Or for God?

To enjoy God more, or to take pride in what you can master? To marvel at what God can do, or to quietly judge yourself as better than others? Beware the insidiously deceptive nature of the human heart!

Religion can give you tools for self-mastery, but the gospel gives you tools for fearless freedom and stunning joy in God – look at what God has done in me!! It's not me! It's God at work in me. See? So then when you look at the self-control that is the fruit of the Spirit, you notice something: that the hand holding the shears which you thought was your hand is actually the Hand of God. He is the Gardener. He is the Vine-Dresser, the Pruner.

Yes, you cooperate, you entrust yourself to Him like you entrust yourself to the surgeon performing surgery on you. And you have a deep, abiding, restfulness, joyfulness, gentleness, patience, peace, and faithfulness ever growing, ever deepening, ever giving you this beautiful, remarkable character that attracts people to the God who transforms lives like yours. \*Gal 5:24\* See how stark and strong this is. Do not back down from this. True Christians are those who delight in the pruning. True Christians rejoice in crucifying their fleshly instincts.

This is essential bc, for example, in our current cultural moment, many have started referring to evangelicals as those who believe in God, say they love Jesus, but see no need for actual holiness and never go to church. To quote Titus 1:16 here – these are those “who profess to know God, but deny Him by their works.” I encounter a lot of people like this – and you have to go very slow to help them discover what is keeping them away from the church. And there are many stories. The Church hurting people. The Church being hypocritical. The Church ignoring the least of these. But one of the most prevalent themes is the familiar story that we are all experienced experts at: fear and pride that leads to self-protection.

**Conc:** Crucifying the flesh, the self-centeredness of the human condition with its fear and pride, is totally un-natural. Only the Spirit of God, the Divine Power of the Holy Spirit can give this gift of self-control that welcomes pruning, cutting off the selfish independent nature so that fruitful holiness can thrive.

Will you consider self-control in your own life? Will you consider surrendering to the Grace of Pruning? For the Gardener has good, grand intentions for your fruitfulness to thrive.

**Communion:** Ah, and one more step, into the unfathomably deep mines of His grace, take the plunge with me, for this is where power is found – right here, at the Table – You can cut off, you can prune, you can even cut off your right hand b/c Christ was cut off for you, instead of you. He was killed, put to death. And how does this give us power for this fruit of self-control, this pruning work? B/c the deaths that you put yourself through are not unto death! They are unto Life! Jesus defeated death – remember?

The death of death in the death of Christ! But He was put on the place of punishment – propitiation – killed as a criminal, so that all of the deaths we go through are not unto death, but unto life b/c He took your place, my place on the cross of shame, humiliation, nakedness, death. So when you partake, you are taking this in, spiritually nourishing your soul a little deeper into these truths.

Jesus, thank You for going all the way to death for me. For taking my punishment. Give me life in You, and courage and strength to grow in self-control and all the fruit of Your Spirit.

**Bene:** Jude 24-25