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Growing in Self-Control
Galatians 5:22-23
April 26th, 2015, Jeff Germon
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Galatians 5:22–23 (ESV)

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.

In preparing for this sermon I was trying to think about the essence of self-control. It seems to be related to self-discipline. As a matter of fact, sometimes in the Bible, depending on context, the Greek word for both is the same. Self-discipline, however it's the other side of the coin to Self-control.

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Self-discipline is having the power to do the things you know you should do, such as getting regular exercise, getting to bed early, keeping your house tidy, flossing your teeth, practicing a musical instrument, weeding your garden, regularly tithing a portion of your income to the Lord off the top so it doesn't get frittered away, saving a part of your income for retirement, or having a regular quiet time with the Lord.

Self-discipline is about doing the things you know you should do, but they don't necessarily come naturally for you until you have developed a rhythm of doing them. If you are normal, self-discipline is a four letter word. Just the sound of the word can make your stomach turn. It sounds like hard work and the opposite of fun.

But, you talk to any successful athlete, musician, artist, or writer and they will tell you that without self-discipline they would never be great at what they do. You do not coast into being good at anything. When you listen to a great musician and they make it look so easy, like they were born to play, you can bet that behind that fluency were thousands of hours of practice. As a matter of fact, the experts tell us that if you want to become an expert at anything it takes about ten thousand hours of hard work. It takes a tremendous amount of discipline, playing boring scales over and over and over again until your fingers and your brain are working together so it feels natural.

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Self-control is the other side of the coin. It **is about NOT doing the things you know you shouldn't do**, like not eating that second piece of cake — or third, or not spending money on things you know you can't afford, or not drinking too much alcohol, not having sex outside of marriage, or not saying something out of anger that you know will hurt someone and you will regret later, or not interrupting, but instead choosing to listen and ask questions. It's about not watching too much TV, or not spending too much time on Facebook, or things like that. Self-control is about not doing things that are harmful to you or others, but are natural for you to do.

I have self-control and self-discipline with many things, but there is one thing that I have never been able to master control over and that is candy. If there is candy nearby I will eat it. That's why we never have any candy at our place. If we do it will be gone in one sitting. And when Ruthie and I go to the grocery store, she knows that it is best for me to make a wide berth around the candy aisle so I'm not tempted. I have a sweet tooth that seems to be uncontrollable, so we have had to put some fences up to keep me safe from the candy demons. Have you ever seen a little kid screaming and throwing a temper tantrum in the candy aisle because his mommy won't let him have a chocolate bar? That's me. Not really, but if I didn't have the little amount of self-control I do have, it would be.

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Self-control keeps us safe from things that will harm us or others. And it is one of the fruits of the Spirit that Jesus wants to develop in us. Self-control is so important. Self-control is the fruit that is most responsible for our peace and joy. We talked a bit about this a couple weeks ago. When we act in ways that go against the values God has stamped on our hearts with his image we lose our peace and our joy. Doing the thing you know is the wrong thing to do, or not doing the thing you know is the right thing to do will take your joy and peace away so fast you won't know what hit you.

For instance, when you speak before thinking and say harsh words that hurt someone, what happens to your peace and your joy? Before you blurt those words out, you talk yourself into thinking that you will feel better if you tell this person off, because, after all they deserve it. But, unless your conscience is already dangerously seared from continually saying hurtful things so you no longer care, your joy and peace will flee from you when you behave in ways that are contrary to your values. That dissonance we talked about a couple weeks ago is a signal that there is something wrong and it needs to be made right. And joy and peace will remain elusive until such time as you do the right thing.

Now, the opposite of self-control is debauchery. That's an old word we don't hear too often and when we do we raise our eyebrows and wonder what century the person who said it is from. Debauchery is excessive indulgence in sensual pleasures. It means to do what feels good at the time. Now, there are those would say that this is the definition of freedom.

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They would say freedom is the ability to do whatever you feel like when you feel like it. Let's think about that. If that's what you believe, you need to ask yourself, who or what is in control? Is it really freedom to be controlled by your passions? I think we all know that if we allow ourselves to be controlled by our passions we do not feel free at all. Anyone who has struggled with any addiction knows, whether it is addiction to porn, or cigarettes, or drugs, or alcohol, chocolate cake, or watching TV.

It is not freeing to just let your passions run wild to do what they feel like at the time. It is actually the opposite. It is a ball and chain. It's a desperate feeling to be controlled by something other than your self being controlled by the Spirit. That is why self-control and self-discipline are both so important. Without self-control we will not grow in any of the other fruit and hence joy and peace are impossible.

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The fruit of self-control, coupled with self-discipline, and powered by the Holy Spirit, is the engine that will drive growth in each of the other fruit.

If you do not have self-control and self-discipline, growth goes out the window. They are both so important. They work together. If you do not have the self-control to say "No" to something you shouldn't be doing, you will use up the time and energy and motivation to say "Yes" to the thing you should be doing. And conversely, if you don't have the self-discipline to say "Yes" to something you should be doing, what will typically happen is you will lose the will-power to say "No" to the thing you shouldn't be doing. You will be too spiritually and emotionally flabby to say "No".

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The way we develop in any of the fruit is to practice them in the power of the Spirit recognizing that we do not have what it takes if left to our own devices. We need to recognize that **we are powerless** and then enter into training with Jesus to grow in any of the fruit of the Spirit.

Let's take a look at a few verses of Scripture that allude to this dynamic.

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1 Timothy 4:7-8 (ESV)

⁷ Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness; ⁸ for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.

In some strange way our training down here on earth is preparing us for life with God in heaven when we die. I really have no idea what that means, but that's what the Bible says. There is some kind of eternal benefit to training in godliness down here. We are practicing for heaven.

Now, there are some Christians who are averse to any self-effort. They have the wrong belief that God is going to somehow magically make us godly without any effort on our part. That thinking will simply produce weak flabby nominal Christians. They call themselves by the name, Christian, but they are not growing to resemble Christ. Discipleship is not about gathering more information about the bible, or about God. It is about purposefully and actively apprenticing with Jesus so he can transform us into his character.

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We will never coast into Christ-likeness.

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Hebrews 12:11 (ESV)

¹¹ For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

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Can you see the active nature of discipleship here? Discipline and training that leads to the fruit of righteousness. There is nothing passive about growing in Jesus.

Titus 2:11–14 (ESV)

¹¹ For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, ¹² training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age, ¹³ waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, ¹⁴ who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.

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2 Timothy 3:16–17 (ESV)

¹⁶ All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

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1 Peter 4:7–11 (ESV)

⁷ The end of all things is at hand; therefore be self-controlled and sober-minded for the sake of your prayers. ⁸ Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since love covers a multitude of sins. ⁹ Show hospitality to one another without grumbling. ¹⁰ As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God's varied grace: ¹¹ whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.

So, we can see clearly that if we expect to grow as disciples of Jesus and become the men and women he has created us to be we need to take the process of discipleship seriously and train with him.

Building our spiritual muscles does not come easily. We will need to practice saying “No” to things that

are not good for us so we have the time, energy and motivation to say “Yes” to the things we should be doing. And that is where joy and peace is found.

The other side of this is that we cannot change to any degree simply by self-effort.

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John 15:1–5 (ESV)

¹ “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. ² 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. ³ Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴ Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. ⁵ I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

In John 15 Jesus tells his disciples that if they want to bear fruit they will be pruned. God will help us by pruning away things in our lives that get in the way of our growth. He also says we will not grow, or bear fruit apart from him. We are powerless to change on our own. We need to recognize this if we are going to grow or change.

Now, any of these truths can be brought to an extreme. Some Christians have the belief that God will do it all and they think any self effort is of the flesh, or the old nature. As I alluded to earlier, this is very false and leads to spiritually and emotionally flabby Christians. It sounds really spiritual to say “let go and let God”, which we do need to do at times, but when you take that to an extreme it simply leads to a passivity that will breed immaturity. We will just let things happen to us because we believe that if God is sovereign, he will do it all with no effort or training from us. I don’t see that in the Bible at all.

The truth is that in God’s sovereignty, because he loves us and wants us to freely choose to love him in return, he has given us the power and the ability to make choices. Sometimes we make good choices. Sometimes not so much. Look at what Paul said to his young protégé, Timothy.

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2 Timothy 1:6–7 (ESV)

⁶ For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands, ⁷ for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control.

There are a lot of choices packed into this little verse. A choice to remember. A choice to fan into flame and use the gifts God has given. A choice to not give into fear. A choice to, instead, use godly power, love and self-control. These are all God-given things. He has given them to us to use for good, and he has given us the choice to use them or not.

God has given us the ability to choose. We have, by his grace, the power to choose, to control ourselves, to do right or wrong, good or evil. Yes, these are all God-given initiatives. But he has given us choice. We choose, either to follow the path of least resistance and let our passions take us wherever they may, or to wisely, and by the grace of God, and the power of the Holy Spirit, be self-controlled.

Every day we make hundreds of decisions, starting from when we throw our feet on the floor when we wake up and ending when we decide to close our eyes and go to sleep. And each of these decisions take either self-control, or self-discipline.

Adam and Eve showed little self-control in their god-given power to choose. Choice is, at it's core, the essence of what it means to be made in God's image. He gives us the ability to choose. We have the power to create or to tear down.

Our tongues, James said, also have the power to destroy or build up. Our choice. Self-control. We can, by the grace and power of Jesus, control our anger, our lust, our feelings etc. God has given us the power to not be victims to our every passion. This is good news, friends.

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There is hope for every single one of us. You can have control over your anger, over your lust, over your jealousy, over your critical spirit, and over any addiction you have, by surrendering them to Jesus.

In order to conquer our passions we need to be aware of them. Learn to be aware of your inside voice. When you are in conversation with another person there are actually three conversations going on at the same time. There is conversation you are having out loud with the other person. And then there is the conversation you are each having with your inside voice. And sometimes the three conversations can be drastically different.

For example, you could be saying with your outside voice, "Oh, yes, that is such a great idea. You are brilliant!" And your inside voice is simultaneously saying, "I can't believe he just suggested that. What a moron! Sheesh!"

And God does not want to just change how we treat each other on the outside. He wants to change us at our very core so our every thought is for the good of others. And, although this is counterintuitive, doing what does not come naturally will bring us joy and peace as we walk in unity with each other and with God.

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One final thing we need **in order to gain victory over those things that tend to control us is that we need a vision of something better.** Something more attractive. There has to be something we truly believe is better than the thing we are tempted to do. For example, if your temptation is for candy, like mine is, you need to first of all ask yourself, "If I continue letting my passion for candy take control of my life, without any constraints whatsoever, where will that lead? Rotten teeth. Obesity. Diabetes etc. Are those good goals?"

What would a better vision be? Strong teeth, healthy body weight, and balanced blood sugar levels.

You can ask the same question with any vice, addiction, or unhealthy character trait. Is your inability to control your anger getting in the way of good relationships? If you don't do anything about it what will result? What's a better vision? What about overspending, or sexual lust, or...? Whatever it is that is getting the better of you, you need to ask those questions and then surrender them to Jesus. And like I said the last couple weeks, own up to them with a small group of people you trust. Be accountable to them and ask them to help you be the man or woman God has called you to be. It is so worth it. Joy will be yours. Peace will be yours because your relationships will be restored.



Growing in Self-Control
Learning to Walk in the Freedom of Christ
Galatians 5:22-23
Week of April 26th, 2015

Objective of this study: To understand how to give God control of those things that hold you captive, and to grow in the fruit of self-control.

Worship (5 – 10 minutes)

1. Spend five minutes in silent prayer asking God to prepare your heart for how he wants to speak to you.
2. After the five minutes of silence have someone interrupt the silence and read Psalm 51:1-17 meditatively to the group. Then pause for about a minute and let it sink in.
3. Sing a song or two of praise and thanksgiving to God.

Welcome (5 – 10 minutes)

What's your favourite dessert or food that you have a hard time not eating too much of?

Word/Work (60 - 75 minutes)

1. What stood out from the sermon?
2. Read or recite Galatians 5:22-23.
3. What's the difference between self-control and self-discipline? How are these different than legalism?
4. What are the two extreme views in regards to self-control and self-discipline and what are their results?
5. Divide up the following verses to read. What do each of them say about either self-control, self-discipline, or training? Apply each of the verses to an area of your life you are struggling with or fruit God is working on in you.
 1. 1 Timothy 4:7-8
 2. Hebrews 12:11
 3. Titus 2:11-14
 4. 2 Timothy 3:16-17
 5. 1 Peter 4:7-11

Sermon Quote: **“So, we can see clearly that if we expect to grow as disciples of Jesus and become the men and women he has created us to be we need to take the process of discipleship seriously and train with him. Building our spiritual muscles does not come easily. We will need to practice saying “No” to things that are not good for us so we have the time, energy and motivation to say “Yes” to the things we should be doing. And that is where joy and peace is found.”**

6. Read John 15:1-17 - Spend some time here. Dig in. What will be the ultimate result of spending time with Jesus? Describe what a disciple who spends time learning from Jesus looks like.