Someone sent me an email this week. It had pictures with various church signs that have weekly messages on them. You know the type. The very first one was from Johnson Memorial United Methodist Church. It read; “What Is Hell Like? Come Hear Our Preacher.”

I’ve been chiseling away at this summer-long series on the “Fruit of the Spirit.” I hope it hasn’t been like that! Today we come to the final fruit, self-control.

Paul writes;

\[ \text{22} \text{By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.} \]

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Paul may have saved the best for last! How many problems could be solved in the world today with self-control?

- All violent crime would disappear, along with most of the prison population.

- Robbery, theft and fraud would vanish, along with kidnappings and abductions.

- Alcohol and drug addictions would be eliminated.

- All sexual, emotional and physical abuse would cease.

- The divorce rate would drop.
• Many lawsuits and litigations could be avoided.
• Self-control could reduce unwanted pregnancies.
• Automobile accidents would decline, along with road rage.
• Obesity would be under control.
• People would quit smoking.
• The school dropout rate would decline, as would most low-test scores.
• Job performance would increase.
• All gossip, ridicule, judgment and unforgiving spirits would have to yield to self-control.
• The entire list of the seven deadly sins; pride, envy, anger, sloth, greed, gluttony, and lust... Boom! Deleted!
• And you can add to the list.

The point is, the world would be a better place with self-control!

But it’s not. That’s not to say there is no self-control among us. There is plenty. Think of all the people around the world who will get up tomorrow morning and go to work. But we humans struggle with self-control.

The very man who gave us this fruit once wrote:
“I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want but the evil I do not want is what I do. So, I find it to be law that when I want to do what is good, evil lies at hand. Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Romans 7:18b-19,21, 24-25).

If the great Apostle Paul wrote that, what are my chances?
Emmet Fox, in his commentary on the Sermon on the Mount writes;
If you seek systematically to destroy in yourself everything which you know should not be there – not feeding or nourishing them by giving in to them, but starving them to death by refusing them expression;…then, you are worthy to be called the salt of the earth. (Fox, The Sermon on the Mount, p.51)

It is up to us to starve those things that should not be there. If you feed them they stay alive. They even grow. When you shut them down they die. It’s really not that complicated. It’s just that hard to do. That’s why we need this fruit of self-control as a gift from God! You can’t do it alone.

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Sam Williams writes;

*Self-control is, nevertheless, an ironic virtue because it is the fruit of the Spirit, not a work of the self!*

(Sam Williams, Galatians, Abingdon Press, p. 151.)

So how does that work? If it is self-control, wouldn’t it be up to me to do it? “I’ve got to fight my own demons. I’ve got to resist my own temptations. I’ve got to control my self.” Well yeah, until you can’t. What happens then?

Our friends in Alcoholics Anonymous have a few things to teach us about self-control. The Twelve-Step Program. Bill Wilson and Dr. Robert H. Smith established these life-saving steps in 1946 in Akron, Ohio.

**Step #1:** We admitted we were powerless over alcohol - that our lives had become unmanageable.

**Step #2:** Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

**Step #3:** Made a decision to turn our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.

There’s more.

A moral inventory.
Admitting the exact nature of your wrongs.
A willingness to have God remove all these defects in character.
Humbly ask God to remove these shortcomings.
Make a list of all persons we have harmed and be willing to make amends with all of them.
Make those amends wherever possible.
More personal inventory and admitting faults.
Improve constant contact with God through prayer.
And carry this message to others who need it, practicing these principles in all our affairs.

WOW! That is a lot of work! And you get a Sponsor too! And don’t forget those powerful meetings. And did you count how many times God is mentioned?
That’s how hard self-control is. The stronger the demon, the more difficult the control. Don’t fool yourselves. Those battling with alcohol are not the only ones struggling with self-control. They just take it more seriously than most of us. Something to learn there.

Looking at these nine fruit of the Spirit, these nine characteristics of God, you quickly realize that it’s impossible for us to simply produce these.

Our love will be limited.
Our joy can be tied to circumstances.
There are some things that we can’t reconcile for peace.
There’s a limit to our patience, our kindness, our generosity and our faithfulness.
I can try to be gentle, until you cross me.
The same is true with self-control. I can’t always do it!

So, what are you going to do? How do you fair with self-control? Wander through life being susceptible to this or that? That’s exhausting. Weak boundaries, poor discipline. Maybe win a battle, but lose the war. Denial, (“I didn’t do that.”) anger, (“I can’t stop doing that.”), a repetition of failure, but blame it on someone else. All classic responses. Or is there something else?

Is there a way to rise above the flood of temptation? Is there something in there, something down deep in the basement of who you are, that is actually God’s Spirit within you? Could that be true? All of this, loaded up inside of you; love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. God, right there, with all of that…in you. Could that be true?

I suppose each person, culture, and nation has to answer that for themselves. Even so, it’s a long ride to the cemetery if we are left to live our lives on our own power.

Well, we’ve come to the end of this series, and we’ve preached up a bowl of fruit salad! Isn’t it interesting that the Bible begins with a story about people eating the wrong fruit, and here at the end of the book we have a different bowl of fruit?

By contrast…Paul writes, meaning; different from the other fruit, different from the other choices, different from the other life. By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. There is no law against such things.

That’s because no law is needed. This isn’t about rules. It’s about a relationship with God, through Christ, empowered by the Holy Spirit, who, believe it or not, dwells in you.
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Let us pray.

Merciful God, these fruit are desperately needed in our world today. They are needed in your Church. They are needed in us, and they are needed in me. We acknowledge that without these fruit, we are form without substance, an organization without purpose, a people without power. By your grace, O Lord, may You bear these fruit within us, less we miss Thy kingdom’s goal. Through the risen Christ we pray. Amen.