

Title: *The Fruit of the Spirit is Self-Control*

Text: Galatians 5:23

It's interesting how this sermon series fell on the calendar. We started on Mother's Day with the Fruit of the Spirit is Love. Somehow that seemed appropriate. What didn't seem quite as appropriate was when I tracked it out and realized that on this Sunday of July 4th weekend, we would be talking about self-control. You may say, "That's nice. What does that have to do with July 4th?"

We sang our national hymn, *America the Beautiful* earlier in the service.

As English professor Katherine Lee Bates traveled from Massachusetts to Colorado on her way to a summer assignment, she marveled at the sights. The gleaming alabaster buildings of the White City at Chicago's World Columbian Exposition of 1893. The endless miles of wheat fields in Kansas. While gazing at the Great Plains from atop majestic Pikes Peak, words filled Bates' head, words she gave to composer Samuel Ward. Their gift to us, *America the Beautiful*, has become our national hymn.

We know well the words of the first stanza but sometimes miss the important words of the second:

America, America, God mend thy every flaw.

Confirm thy soul in self-control, thy liberty in law.

John Adams, one of our founding fathers and the second president of our country said, "Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other." I've given a lot of thought recently to what is the best form of government. In America, we hold democratic principles to be somewhat sacred, even though, in actual fact, we are a republic and not a pure democracy. We've all watched with interest as democratic movements have arisen in the Middle Eastern, Muslim countries. The concern is that a Shia majority may win all of the elections and oppress a Sunni, or a non-Muslim minority. What really makes our system so great is its constitutional protections for the rights of the minority. Majority rule can descend into mob rule which is dangerous and oppressive.

I believe that's what Katherine Lee Bates is referring to when she says. *Confirm thy soul in self-control, thy liberty in law.* Liberty comes with law. In order for me to be able to be free to enjoy my liberty fully, I have to have some legal protections that will keep evil-doers from exploiting, abusing, or oppressing me. When John Adams says that our constitution was made for a moral and religious people, he was talking about people who would be moral in themselves and tolerant of the rights and opinions of others. That involves a certain amount of self-control. We're not a police state that depends upon the power of the state or the power of a gun to keep people moral. Some folks may wonder about that when it comes to discussing social issues and how we preserve our culture and our identity as a moral people. We have the expectation that a good citizen is a moral citizen. Paul says, "For rulers hold no terror for

those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you.” That calls for a certain amount of self-discipline and self-control.

So if you’re going to be a good citizen, you need to exercise self-control to restrain those impulses toward bad or destructive behavior. Paul would also say that if you’re going to be a Christian who is showing the work of the Spirit in your life, you will exercise self-control. This isn’t the kind of self-control that we might see in an old western where a guy has been shot and they have to get the bullet out in primitive conditions so they give the patient a stiff shot of whiskey and something to clench his teeth onto while they go after the bullet. Self-control in that instance is gritting your teeth and toughing it out the best way that you can. It’s something else. It’s strength or power that comes from having a Spirit-shaped character.

In the ancient world, the Greeks were very high on the virtue of self-control. If you asked them for a list of character qualities, number one on the list would be self-control. Socrates considered it to be the foundational human virtue, because in his opinion you couldn’t develop any other virtues if you were constantly overcome by your own passions and drives. In Greek thought, “the highest ideal was to master one’s desires so that one was free to enjoy them rather than be enslaved to them.”

It’s interesting that the Greeks would place self-control first on their list and that Paul would have it last on his list. Paul wasn’t too into anything that had to do with “self”. Paul writes in Ephesians, and he says something very similar in Colossians, “²² You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; ²³ to be made new in the attitude of your minds; ²⁴ and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.”

Paul was never one to say, “Express yourself. Be yourself. You gotta make yourself happy,” or anything like that. Paul wasn’t about anything that exalted the self. He was about dying to the old self and putting off the old self and allowing God’s Holy Spirit through his process of sanctification to produce a new self.

It does raise an interesting paradox however. Sometimes people get afraid of the Holy Spirit and have the idea that if they fully yield to the Holy Spirit, he may lead them to do something that would embarrass them. As if they might say, “I was in the Spirit and I just couldn’t help myself.” Well the fruit of the Spirit is self-control. It’s not as if the Holy Spirit takes over your life and makes you just some sort of puppet. There have been people who have had those sort of almost mystical experiences where they have just been taken over but that is not the norm. The Holy Spirit completes us and makes us into the people God wants us to be with the character of Christ.

He makes you a stronger, better self than you could or would be otherwise. You look at someone who displays all of the fruit of the spirit in their life – different fruit in different degrees, but it’s all there – and you say, “That’s the kind of person I would like to be.”

Jesus said, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you and you will be my witnesses.” I wonder if part of that witness, and part of what Jesus is talking about is that you will be made into new people. It will mean that you are controlled by the Holy Spirit, but it doesn’t mean that you have nothing to do with how you live your life. It means that the Holy Spirit is making you into a new person with ability and strength that you didn’t know you had.

Could you say that many of the social ills in our country today stem from a lack of self-control? I’m not ordinarily given to blaming all of the ills in our country on the 1962 Supreme Court decision on school prayer. There has been a study done, though that has some interesting results. After extensive research on what happened before and after 1962, the statistics are startling in category after category. If I were to show you a graph in just the areas of premarital sex, violent crimes, sexually transmitted diseases, and teen suicides, you would be stunned. In each category, for the ten to fifteen years prior to 1962, numbers were flat or slightly increasing if it was a year in which the population increased. But then in 1963 we start to see dramatic exponential growth in every one of those areas. The only area that went down after 1963 was SAT scores.

I have conflicting thoughts over the whole school prayer issue. If I were in Utah, I wouldn’t want the Mormons writing the prayer. If I were in Dearborn, Michigan, I wouldn’t want the Muslims writing the prayer. When I was in high school in suburban Washington, DC which was hardly the buckle of the Bible Belt, in the mid-to-late 70's, we had a moment of silence which some teachers took seriously and enforced and others didn’t. Do you know what the text of that prayer said? It read, “Almighty God, we acknowledge our dependence on Thee and we beg Thy blessing over us, our parents, our teachers, and our nation.”

Where am I going with this and what’s the point? Maybe if we acknowledged that there is a God and we need him and we have evil in our heart because we’re fallen creatures and there are bad people who do bad things and we need his blessing and protection, maybe we would be learning a little bit more about self-control. Just a thought.

Self-control or self-discipline is needed if we are to succeed at anything in life and if we are to grow in our relationship with Christ. It’s needed if we’re going to spend time in the word when there may be other things that are calling. I know when I was in Maryland, on my day off, I enjoyed taking a leisurely read through the morning newspaper. I felt convicted that sometimes I was more eager to read the paper than I was to read my Bible. It takes self-discipline sometimes to do what you need to do to grow in Christ. That’s why we refer to them as Spiritual Disciplines because they aren’t always easy. If we are yielded to the Holy Spirit, and He is working in our life and we desire to grow in him, he’ll bring the conviction that is necessary and the self-control to spend time in the word even when you’re feeling the pull of other worthwhile things that can rob us of that time with him.

Paul wrote to Timothy, “⁷ For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.” Paul wrote about his on-going effort to live faithfully for Jesus Christ. That word self-discipline is not the same word that is used in the list

of the fruit of the Spirit but the idea is the same. There's a picture of Paul as one who is disciplined in fulfilling the calling that God had placed upon his life.

In I Corinthians 9:24-27, he uses athletic imagery., “²⁴ Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. ²⁵ Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. ²⁶ Therefore I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air. ²⁷ No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

In the Christian life who is our trainer or our coach? The Holy Spirit! Paul wrote to Titus, “¹¹ For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. ¹² It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age.” Isn't it great to know that when you give your heart and your life to Jesus Christ, his Spirit comes to live inside of you and is there to coach you and to help you and bring you to be the kind of person that he wants you to be?

One of the things that he teaches us is just the value of discipline and part of that is the value of delayed gratification. Around 1970, Walter Mischel launched a classic experiment. He left a succession of 4-year-olds in a room with a bell and a marshmallow. If they rang the bell, he would come back and they could eat the marshmallow. If, however, they didn't ring the bell and waited for him to come back on his own, they could then have two marshmallows.

In videos of the experiment, you can see the children squirming, kicking, hiding their eyes—desperately trying to exercise self-control so they can wait and get two marshmallows. Their performance varied widely. Some broke down and rang the bell within a minute. Others lasted 15 minutes.

The children who waited longer went on to get higher SAT scores. They got into better colleges and had, on average, better adult outcomes. The children who rang the bell quickest were more likely to become bullies. They received worse teacher and parental evaluations 10 years on and were more likely to have drug problems at age 32.

Mischel concluded that children may be taught "that it pays to work toward the future instead of living for instant gratification." I don't know how well I would have done in that experiment when I was 4. I'm not sure how well I would do today. Isn't that really the nub of what we need so desperately to succeed in any arena of life?

Don't we need the self-control that says whatever thrill I may get through illicit pre-marital sexual relations pales in comparison with the joy and fulfillment I can find through a faithful, exclusive relationship with my husband or my wife? Is there any trade-off for being able to say to your spouse on your wedding night, you're my first and you will be my only?

Don't we need self-control that says, “I don't have to accumulate everything that it took my parents a lifetime to accumulate

within the first 3 years of graduating from college? I can save money and I can delay gratification and I can be content with what I have and I don't have to live in fear of when the credit card bills come in every month.

Don't we need self-control that says, "I would really like to give them a piece of my mind and let them know exactly what I think of them, but I'm going to respond gently and see if I can defuse the situation rather than escalate the situation?"

Wouldn't it be a good thing to have the self-control that says, "I don't have to be first all the time. I'm going to be a servant. I'm going to step back and let someone else be first and I'll trust that one day, it will be my turn to be first. I just need to concentrate on being a servant?"

Don't we need self-control that says, "I'm going to invest in those kind of relationships that bring lasting joy and fulfillment rather than seeking a cheap thrill through drugs and alcohol?"

Don't I really need the self-control that says, "I'm going to act in a Christ-like manner, even when I don't feel like it right at the moment?"

This isn't just good positive thinking or relational advice. This is the gospel because this is what is promised to you as you give your life to Jesus Christ and yield control of your life to His Holy Spirit. William Barclay says, "*Enkrateia* is that great quality which comes to a man when Christ is in his heart, that quality which makes him able to live and to walk in the world, and yet to keep his garment unspotted from the world.

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