

# FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT

## Self-control, *Galatians 5:22-23*

We have spent two months examining the individual characteristics Paul included in his “fruit of the Spirit”<sup>1</sup> list in *Galatians 5:22-23*. We have dedicated time to considering that list because it offers a portrait of the character that God wants to define His people, a character that reflects His own identity and that enables people to be His image-bearers in the world. In this lesson we will consider the final item in Paul’s list – self-control – and the place it ought to have within our lives.

### " The people were running wild"<sup>2</sup>

- Paul’s “fruit of the Spirit” includes characteristics that echo God’s character...until “self-control”, the final the final item in that list (*Galatians 5:22-23*).
  - Self-control speaks about the need to regulate one’s behavior that, left uncontrolled, creates problems.
  - God has no need to exercise self-control because He possesses no problem-causing characteristics, or, as John wrote, “in him is no darkness at all” (*1 John 1:5*).
- The Holy Spirit’s effort to cultivate self-control within Christians indicates the presence of darkness within us that we need “rule over” (*cf. Genesis 4:7*), reminding us that:
  - Our own desires are more than innocent excesses; sin’s influence makes our desires hostile to God’s interests (*Galatians 5:16-24*).
  - Self-control seeks to crucify our self-indulgent “passions and desires” (*Galatians 5:22-24*).
- The following two contrasting examples illustrate our need to “rule over” self-indulgent behavior.
  - While Moses met with God on Mount Sinai, the Israelites at the mountain’s base rejected the instructions recently given to them by God - they made an idol for themselves and worshipped it (*Exodus 20:3-6; 32:1-6*). But their behavior did not possess the reserved solemnity often associated with worship. Instead, Exodus implies a scene of debauchery that led to Moses’ assessment that “the people were running wild” (*Exodus 32:25*).
  - Paul’s description of self-control in *1 Corinthians 9:24-27* offers a contrast to the scene in *Exodus 34*. Using the example of an athlete who “exercises self-control in all things” in order to win (*1 Corinthians 9:25*), Paul wrote that he disciplined and controlled his body and “for the sake of the gospel” (*1 Corinthians 9:23, 27*).

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<sup>1</sup> All quotes from the Bible come from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (ESV Permanent Text Edition, Crossway, 2016) unless otherwise noted.

<sup>2</sup> *Exodus 32:25. The Holy Bible, New International Version* (International Bible Society, 1984).



- The contrast between the idolatrous Israelites and Paul illustrates the importance of self-control, a point repeatedly made in the Bible.
  - Self-control, for example:
    - Is a non-negotiable requirement for following Jesus (*Luke 9:23*).
    - Holds a defining place in Christian living (*Acts 24:25*).
    - Is a goal of God's salvation (*Titus 2:11-12*).
    - Enables one to be an effective and fruitful part of Jesus' kingdom (*2 Peter 1:6*).
  - A lack of self-control, on the other hand:
    - Leaves one defenseless against the temptations "crouching at the door" (*Proverbs 25:28; Genesis 4:7*).
    - Creates "times of difficulty" that frustrate the efforts of God's people (*2 Timothy 3:2-4*).
    - Receives Jesus' strong condemnation (*Matthew 23:25*).
- While we tend to avoid uncomfortable topics like sexuality, we need to note that the Bible often connects sexuality and self-control. Consider:
  - Abstinence in marriage stresses the self-control of husbands and wives, introducing sexual temptations into their relationship (*1 Corinthians 7:1-5*).
  - Sexual temptation for unmarried people strains their self-control, prompting Paul to recommend unmarried people marry rather than "burn with passion" (*1 Corinthians 7:8-9*).
  - The list of "the works of the flesh" that Paul uses as a contrast to his "fruit of the Spirit" begins and ends with sexual sins – "sexual immorality...orgies" (*Galatians 5:19-21*).
  - The New Testament repeatedly places uncontrolled sexuality opposite self-controlled Christian behavior (*cf. Romans 1:16-32; 1 Corinthians 5:1-6:20; Galatians 5:16-24; Ephesians 5:1-15*).

## Applications

- Self-control refers to the intentional training of one's body and mind to serve God's interests rather than one's own desires.
- Self-control is an 'ability' one can improve through training.
- Training our self-control involves:
  - Admitting to the ugly and destructive reality of self-indulgence in one's life.
  - Intentionally making choices about one's life, one's relationships, one's career, one's finances, etc., that foreground God's will.
  - Immersing oneself in God's word that provides a corrective to the world's self-indulgent messages.
  - Developing relationships with other Christians that provide loving accountability.

May God help us to truly control our desires so that we can faithfully represent His will in our world.

