

Self(less)-control
1 Corinthians 7:1 – 9; Galatians 5:16 – 25
Sunday, September 8, 2019

I have to start by confessing that I am probably not the best person to be giving a sermon on self-control. You see, it was just “birthday week” in our house – Brandon’s birthday was on a Sunday, and then Emily’s birthday was the following Thursday. So we had a lot of *cake* in the house. Brandon wanted the Oreo Blizzard ice cream cake from Dairy Queen, and Emily wanted one of those big cookie cakes from the place in the mall. (Which I was *more* than happy to oblige each of them.) But even after inviting all the family over for cake (grandparents, aunts, uncles – there were about 13 of us), we *still* had about half of each cake left. And, I mean, you don’t just want to throw the rest away and waste that money, right? So even though I’d been trying to be careful about what I eat, I *just couldn’t resist* having a slice after the kids went to bed at night...each night...or after lunch...or *instead* of lunch.

And then I was at Target, when I noticed that they already had Halloween decorations out. And at first I was like, “Come on! It’s *two months* before Halloween! Why can’t we just *wait*?” But then I saw that they had the Reese’s peanut butter pumpkins out. And any self-righteous thoughts that I had about it being too soon for Halloween went right out the window.

When it comes to stuff like that, I have *very little* (if any) self-control. If there is a box of donuts sitting out somewhere, I don’t even have to know who brought them or how they got there, I *will* have one. And why would you just have *one* donut when you could have *two* and be *twice* as happy?

The *problem* is, I know it’s not *good* for me. I *want* to exercise self-control when it comes to stuff like this, because I know that it’s not *healthy* for me, and I have a *family* to think about. I

want to be healthy so that I can be around for them for a long time. So when I make a decision to give in to those cravings, that decision is bigger than just *me*. It effects Jen and the kids and you all and potential grandkids one day. The *reason* that we are called to practice self-control is because our words and our actions are *bigger* than just us; they affect more people than just *us*.

There was a football game last weekend between Jackson State and Bethune-Cookman. It was a close game, and in the third quarter, Jackson State scored a touchdown to finally take the lead. There was a little bit of a scuffle in the end zone because it was such a tight game and tensions were high. When out of nowhere, Jackson State's *mascot* – a grown man in a tiger costume – ran onto the field and tried to break up the fight. Well, you can't do that. The tiger ended up getting Jackson State called for an unsportsmanlike conduct penalty, which cost them 15 yards, and they ended up losing the game. He couldn't control himself, and his actions ended up affecting more people than just him.

Now, I'm going to make a big leap here from birthday cake and Reese's cups and football to say that this is exactly what Paul is talking about in his letter to the Corinthians. One of the things that we know about the Corinthian church is that they had a *whole lot* of problems. And quite a few of the problems were sexual in nature. This was a church that had a hard time practicing self-control when it came to their sexual desires.

One thing that's important to understand here is that Paul and the Corinthians believed that the second coming of Christ was imminent. That *any day now*, Christ was going to return to establish his kingdom upon the earth. So they needed to be *ready*. And if Christ was going to be coming any day now and this present age was going to come to an end, there really wasn't much of a point, Paul thought, for anyone to get married. He says a few verses later, "In view of the

impending crisis, it is well for you to remain as you are. If you're married, stay married. If you're single, stay single." Focus on God and practice self-control.

But Paul says that he knows not everyone can *do* that. He says, "I wish that everyone could be single like I am and control their passions like I do. But God gives each of us different gifts. So, if you're single," he says, "and you *can't* control your passions, then you should go ahead and get married, so that you aren't just running around with anyone and everyone, doing whatever you want." Paul is telling them to practice self-control in their relationships.

Now, I know that this is a strange text for *us* to be talking about in *our* discussion of self-control. But the *reason* that we are talking about it is because of this one thing that Paul says. He says in verses 3 and 4 that the husband should give himself to his wife, and the wife should give herself to her husband, because the wife does not have authority over her own body, her husband does. And the husband does not have authority over his own body, his wife does. Paul is saying to them, "You do not *own* yourselves. You do not *belong* to yourselves. You belong to *each other*. And you belong to *God*."

A lot of times we think of self-control as *mastering* ourselves and our desires; *owning* ourselves and our desires. But what Paul is saying here is that we do *not* own ourselves. We belong to each other, and we belong to God. Paul relates that to sexuality here, but it applies to *everything*, to *every* aspect of our lives. Self-control is about realizing that we do not belong to ourselves. That we belong to each other, that we are *bound* to each other, and that my actions affect more than just me; they affect *this other person*. I can't just do whatever I want or say whatever I want to this other person, because I *belong* to them, and *they* belong to *God*. And my actions and words *have* to take that into consideration.

A pregnant mother can't just go off and drink and smoke, because her actions will affect that baby. She is *bound* to that baby, so she has to practice self-control. I can't just go and eat all the cake and donuts and Reese's cups that I want because my actions will have an effect on my wife and my kids and this church. I am *bound* to all of you, so I have to practice self-control. No matter how much we might *want* something or want to *do* something, we have to look at the people we are bound to and how it will affect *them*. Paul says just a few verses before this part that we read today, "You are not your own. Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit that dwells in you." And if the Holy Spirit dwells in us, and we are *living* by the Spirit, desiring the things of the *Spirit* rather than the things of the flesh and of this world, then our lives will bear certain fruit, one of which is self-control.

I think that when we come to that realization – that our lives don't just belong to *us*, that we are connected and bound to other people and to God, that our words and actions are *bigger* than us and they affect others – then we start to be more mindful about *controlling* our words and our actions. We *want* to practice self-control because we love these people around us and we don't want to lose that bond.

For the past three days, I was at a prayer retreat outside of Kansas City. There were about 90 of us there, and one of the things we all agreed to was that we would all pray the same prayers together each day for the next 40 days. And this isn't just like a *short* prayer; this is about a 20-30-minute liturgy of prayer every single morning. And at first, I remember thinking, "Oh man, this is going to be *hard*. This is going to take a lot of *discipline* and *self-control*. And I think the pastor leading the retreat sensed that in us, and he said, "No, it's not about *discipline* or how *hard* you work. It's about *surrendering* yourself and giving yourself – your heart, your mind,

your spirit, your time – over to God.” That stuck with me. *It’s not about how hard you work; it’s about giving yourself over to God.*

One of the things that we need to remember about the Fruit of the Spirit is that it’s not a *checklist*. We can get into that mindset where we think, “If we do *this, this, this*, and *this*; if we work hard to show love and joy and peace and patience and kindness, if we work hard to practice self-control, *then* God will be with us and we will be filled with the Holy Spirit. But that is not what Paul intended when he talked about this. What he’s talking about is, “No, God *is* with us, and we *are* filled with God’s Spirit, and when we *live* from that place, these are the things that will naturally flow forth from us.” An apple tree doesn’t have to *try* to produce apples. It just *does it*, because that’s what it’s *supposed* to do.

So self-control (and all the other Fruit of the Spirit) is not about how *hard* we work and try. It’s about *surrendering* ourselves to God, giving our hearts and minds and time and *lives* over to God. It’s about what *God’s Spirit* can do *in* us and *through* us. It’s about opening ourselves up to embrace the reality that our lives are not our own – we are bound to *each other*, and we are bound to *God*. If we can live from *that* place – that place of loving God and loving our neighbor – then our lives will produce *good fruit* that will nourish and sustain, not just *our* lives, but the lives of those around us, in Christ. Amen.