

1 Samuel 24:1-7
Matthew 4:1-11
1 Corinthians 9:24-27

16th Sunday After Pentecost
Midway Presbyterian Church
September 25, 2022

Cultivating Self-Control

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson

In our Old Testament Lesson today we find King Saul out to kill David who was hiding in a cave with his men. David snuck up and cut off a piece of Saul's robe without him knowing. He could have killed Saul, but he practiced self-control. Listen to these words from 1 Samuel 24:1-11...

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

In our Gospel Lesson we have Matthew's account of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness. It happened right after his baptism by John in the Jordan River. Listen to these words from Matthew 4:1-11...

Introduction to the Epistle Lesson

In our Epistle Lesson today from Paul's First Letter to the Church in Corinth the Apostle uses the metaphor of "running a race" to teach the importance of self-control. Listen to these words from 1 Corinthians 9:24-27...

Sermon

Today we bring to a close our series of sermons on The Fruits of the Spirit as listed in Galatians 5 (22-23). We've heard about love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and gentleness. Now, the last of nine, self-control, will occupy our thoughts.

The Greek word that Paul uses for self-control is *Enkrateia*, referring to the restraining of passions. A dictionary definition of self-control is: "the ability to control oneself, in particular one's emotions and desires...especially in difficult situations."

Jackie Robinson is a familiar name to any baseball fan. During his ten-year career with the Brooklyn Dodgers, the second baseman was an All-Star for six consecutive years and won the National League Most Valuable Player Award in 1949.

In his book *Negotiating the Leadership Zone*, Ken Sylvester shares the story of Jackie Robinson as an example of World Class Self-Control. The first Black to play in the major leagues, Robinson promised that he would not fight back against what he knew he would have to face. Despite the racial slurs, bigotry, and anonymous threats that he would encounter, he would focus on playing the game the best he could. And he did!

In our Old Testament Lesson from 1 Samuel, we have a story about David sparing the life of King Saul. The king and all his armed forces were pursuing David, who would eventually become King of Israel. Saul had stopped in a cave to relieve himself, not knowing that David was hiding in that very cave with some of his men. David's men wanted him to end their fugitive state by killing Saul, but David said that he would not do violence against God's appointed king. He only cuts off a corner of Saul's robe, when he could easily have killed him. Thereby did David practice self-control.

But David did not always exhibit this fruit of the Spirit. Once, from the roof of his palace he saw the beautiful Bathsheba bathing. He sent messengers to get her, and you know the rest of the story. One wrong led to another, with King David placing Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, in the front line of battle where the fighting was fiercest. And, in fact, Uriah was killed. (2 Samuel 11)

Soon after, the Lord sent the prophet Nathan to reprove David. And he did so with these words, "You are the man!" (2 Samuel 12:7) To which the king responded, "I have sinned against the Lord." (2 Samuel 12:13)

Moses was another great figure of the Old Testament who fell short of the glory of God. Remember how he struck the rock in frustration as the children of Israel murmured and complained? And as a consequence to this lack of self-control, Moses was not allowed to enter the promised land. (Numbers 20) As the proverb declares,

He that hath no rule over his own spirit is like a city
that is broken down, and without walls. (25:28)

Of course, it all began in the Garden of Eden when Adam and Eve did not resist the fruit of the forbidden tree. (Gen. 3) In contrast, Jesus shows self-control in our Gospel Lesson as he is tempted right after his baptism, and the divine affirmation from heaven: “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.” (Mt. 3:17)

The Spirit led Jesus into the wilderness, a rocky, daunting place of cliffs and caves, a place believed to be occupied by demons and evil spirits, a place where predators and thieves lurked. There Jesus was tempted to deny whom God said he was and what his mission was.

The tempter came to Jesus and said, “If you are the Son of God, then tell these stones to become bread.” But Jesus answered, “It is written: ‘One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.’”

Then the devil tempted Jesus to jump from the pinnacle of the temple, misusing scripture in quoting Psalm 91:11-12:

For he will command his angels concerning you
to guard you in all your ways.
On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.

And Jesus answered, “Again it is written, ‘Do not put the Lord your God to the test.’” (Dt. 6:16)

And finally, the devil took Jesus to a high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world, which could belong to Jesus if he would bow down and worship him. To which Jesus

answered, “Away with you, Satan! for it is written, ‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’” (Dt. 6:13)

Yes, our Lord showed self-control in his rebuke of the devil’s offer of earthly power and glory. Three renunciations of a chance for a life of worldly adulation. Some Christians may think that, well, Jesus could not have really been tempted like we are. But the writer of our New Testament Letter to the Hebrews was not of that mind. Listen to what he says:

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. (4:15)

God’s Word and Spirit would sustain Jesus, not only in the wilderness, but throughout his earthly life. Even in the Garden of Gethsemane. Even in the suffering on the cross.

Then in our Epistle Lesson we find Paul’s teaching the importance of self-control to the Corinthians in the illustration of a runner in training for a race. Commentator Richard Hays says that Paul’s use of the imagery was inspired by the Isthmian Games, that great athletic festival that was held at Corinth every two years. Even his reference to the athlete’s “perishable wreath” was illuminated by the victory wreath at the Games, a wreath that was made of withered celery.

In modern times every four years The Olympic Games draws the attention of people throughout the world. The 2020 Summer Olympics in Tokyo were postponed for the first time in Olympic history to the summer of 2021, due to the Covid-19 pandemic. In 2024 the host city will be Paris.

Sandy Morris, a native of Greenville, SC, won the Silver Medal in the Women’s Pole Vault at the 2016 Olympics in Rio de Janeiro. Several years ago, Hazel and I got to watch her and other pole vaulters as a section of South Main Street in Greenville was blocked off and a runway and vaulting pit were created.

Of course, to be able to compete in such an athletic endeavor as the Olympics requires a lot of training—a lot of discipline and self-control. Paul says that athletes exercise self-control to receive a perishable wreath, but we receive an imperishable one. (1 Cor. 9:25) If athletes push themselves to win a crown of withered celery, how much more should we practice self-discipline for the sake of an imperishable crown? (Richard Hays, *Interpretation*, p. 116)

No, my friends, the Christian life is not meant to be an orgy of self-gratification but a disciplined life that focuses on things of spiritual value. In his *Imitation of Christ*, Thomas à Kempis says, “When the belly is full to bursting with food and drink, debauchery knocks at the door.”

A dictionary definition of the Deadly Sin of Gluttony reads: “The act or practice of eating to excess.” Gluttony goes beyond what is needed for sustenance—to excess. It argues that if a little is good, a lot will be better. It forfeits the long-term benefits that come from discipline and self-control, to pursue the short-term pleasures of food and drink. And who among us has not succumbed to this glittering vice?

In the New Testament Letter of James we hear about the need to tame our tongues—to practice self-control over what we say. For “the tongue is a fire...From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this ought not to be.” (James 3:6, 10) And only with God’s help, can we tame our tongues.

No, consistently bearing the fruit of self-control is not an easy thing. It requires effort, training, and sacrifice. But the disciplines of prayer, Bible study, and Worship can help equip us to run with perseverance the race set before us. As we look where? To the world and some worldly leader? No, as we look to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. (Heb. 12:2)

In this race there are a great cloud of witnesses surrounding us, yea, cheering us on. Olin Scarborough is now among them. Therefore, let us lay aside all the weights and the sins that so easily entangle and weigh us down, in order that we may run with perseverance the race set before us.

Hear again Paul's words:

...the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things. (Gal. 5:22-23)

There is no law against such things, because these are the very virtues Christ wants all of us to have. As we walk in the Spirit and manifest his fruit, right attitudes and behavior arise from within us. Jesus said,

Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. (Jn. 15:4)

And so we come to the end of this series on the nine Fruits of the Spirit as listed by Paul in his letter to the churches in Galatia. These sermons have certainly called forth all the education I could muster. For example, I have studied the Greek words that Paul uses for each fruit. We have looked at numerous Biblical characters in whom we could see such fruit, or its absence. People like Simon Peter with his *love* for Jesus, *faithful* Ruth and Naomi, and the *kindness* of King David to lame Mephibosheth.

Certainly, these are not the last words on the Fruits of the Spirit. But by God's grace, they may lead us to ongoing reflection on these fruits—fruits that will bless us and others, as we seek to be faithful followers of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.