

The Fruit of the Spirit Is Self-Control



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Judges 13–16; 1 Cor. 9:24–27; Phil. 4:8; Col. 3:1–10; Heb. 12:1, 2; 1 John 2:15, 16.*

Memory Text: “But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified” (*1 Corinthians 9:27, NKJV*).

Though listed last by Paul in Galatians 5:22, 23, “self-control” (sometimes translated “temperance”) is surely not the least of the fruit of the Spirit. It could easily have been first, because it plays a major role in the maturing of other spiritual fruit. It might be said that self-control is the glue that holds all the other qualities together.

Like other fruit of the Spirit, self-control is a gift of grace. It has been called “disciplined grace”: grace because it is free, disciplined because there is something for us to do.

Self-control may sound negative, but it is an integral part of grace itself. If we don't control ourselves—our feelings, our appetites, our drives—then they control us. Thus, it's either self-control under the grace and power of the Holy Spirit, or it's being controlled by someone or something else. We, ultimately, decide.

**Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, March 6.*

The Paradox of Self-Control *(Phil. 2:12, 13)*

Synonyms for *self-control* include *self-discipline*, *strength of mind*, and *willpower*. This fruit of the Spirit extends far beyond simply restraining Christians from doing what's prohibited but includes enabling us to do what's good.

First John 2:15, 16 admonishes us to stay away from three lusts. What are they, and, more important, how could they be manifested in our lives if we aren't careful?

Philippians 4:8 lists items that should be the focuses of the Christian life. What are they, and how can doing what Paul says here protect us from the dangers listed in 1 John 2:15, 16?

There are obviously dos and don'ts in the Christian life. There is a constant struggle with self, with the flesh, with the ways of the world. Paul shares this dilemma in Romans 7:15–18, when he talks about the struggle between what he knows he should do and what he's tempted to do. However, in Romans 8:1, he gives us the answer: "There is therefore now no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus, who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit" (NKJV).

He's talking about walking in the Spirit. A life without the Spirit is incapable on its own of developing the fruit of the Spirit. Though we have the will, Paul speaks for all of us when he says that we don't have the power. The answer to the dilemma of Romans 7 is not when can we overcome but how. And the how is found through faith in Jesus. We give ourselves to Jesus, we claim His righteousness, we are no longer condemned, and we surrender ourselves to Him and choose to walk in the Spirit, choose to follow His will, claiming His promises of victory. The key is holding onto the promises; here's where the power comes from. We cannot do it alone. We have to make the conscious choice to overcome in His name. The struggle is as much vertical (reaching up in faith) as it is horizontal (battling the clamors of the flesh). We need to do both.

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Philippians 4:8*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Understand the relationship between thinking and behavior.

Feel: Desire to strive to master emotions.

Do: Walk in the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

► **Lesson Outline:**

I. Know: The Positive Power of Right Thinking

A Behavior, whether deliberate or unconscious, follows a definite path. Thought is followed by speech and actions. We behave out of what is stored in our mind bank.

1. What truths are found in the psalmist's statement, "Thy word have I hid in mine heart that I might not sin against thee"? (*Ps. 119:11.*)
2. How does living according to God's Word keep the heart pure?

II. Feel: Mastery Over Self Is Possible

A The lusts of the flesh, the eyes, and the pride of life—all have to do with our emotions and feelings.

1. How does this indicate that feelings can be dangerous if they are not sanctified in Christ?

III. Do: Modifying Thought and Behavior

A The issue of self-control often is vexing to the Christian. If wrongly practiced, it can lead to the possible pitfalls of legalism, fanaticism, spiritual discouragement, and depression. As the attacks of Satan are lifelong, so is the development of self-control.

1. How will allowing the Scriptures to inform our thinking help us defeat evil?
2. In what ways can our understanding of God's grace and righteousness by faith develop a spiritually mature and balanced way of thinking?
3. How would neglecting to maintain a devotional life affect our thinking and behavior?

► **Summary:** Right thinking leads to right living. Dependence upon feelings has dangers. Self-control is developed by allowing Scripture to inform our thinking.

Joseph and the Immediate Results of Righteousness

Betrayed by his own family, sold into slavery, Joseph had very good reasons to doubt the love and care (even the existence) of the God that he had been taught about since childhood. That's not, however, what he did.

Read Genesis 39:7–20. In these verses, where do we find the key to why Joseph acted as he did?

How was Joseph “rewarded” for his refusal to yield to temptation? *Gen. 39:20*. He was falsely accused and thrown into prison. Is that what he gets for being faithful?

This is an important point to remember. Can we expect that our determination to do what is right, no matter the cost, will mean that things will turn out OK for us in the short term? What about folks who have lost their jobs, their spouses, their families, indeed, even their lives because they refused to compromise with sin? We have examples of this in the Bible, and perhaps you know people who have gone through something similar. Or perhaps you have gone through it yourself. In the end, suppose Joseph had spent the rest of his life rotting in jail? Would he still have done the right thing?

“For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life” (*Gal. 6:8, NKJV*). What is this text telling us? What is placed in contrast to what? What is at stake? Why, then, is the issue here of paramount importance? How does what Paul writes here help us to understand why, no matter the immediate results, Joseph did right?

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: The Holy Spirit gives us self-control so that we can make good decisions that allow us to be of use to God, others, and ourselves.

Just for Teachers: In this lesson, focus on the necessity of self-control in a life of freedom in Christ.

High-fructose corn syrup: If you've been following health and nutrition news over the past few years, you may know that this ingredient in soft drinks and junk foods has been linked to the proliferation of obesity and related ills in many parts of the world. Why?

High-fructose corn syrup is so calorically dense that it doesn't switch off the hunger mechanism the way other foods do. One may still feel hungry after consuming a gargantuan number of calories in the form of, say, a small soda. We have internal regulators that tell us when to stop eating, but high-fructose corn syrup deftly bypasses them.

This is just what the world, the flesh, and the devil do to our vaunted "free will." We have enough free will to know right from wrong—and occasionally to do the right thing—but not enough to consistently do the things that please God. The things of this world know how to switch off our control mechanisms and walk right in.

The Good News: God has a new control mechanism for you, one that actually works. All you have to do is acknowledge that the one you have now is faulty and claim the fruit of the Spirit, which includes self-control.

Consider This: In a world in which we are encouraged to gratify every desire, why is it often hard to look at self-control as a positive thing? But what is the alternative if we do not?

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Bible Commentary

I. Self-control (*Review Galatians 5:23 with the class.*)

Egkrateia is the Greek word translated as "self-control" in Galatians 5:23.

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Samson and the Fruits of Failure

In Judges 13–16, the Bible gives us the story of Samson. Read through the texts (as much as time allows), keeping in mind the idea of self-control and temperance. There are plenty of powerful lessons we can learn from Samson’s example. How tragic that someone with so many gifts and so much promise could get so easily sidetracked.

“Samson in his peril had the same source of strength as had Joseph. He could choose the right or the wrong as he pleased. But instead of taking hold of the strength of God, he permitted the wild passions of his nature to have full sway. The reasoning powers were perverted, the morals corrupted. God had called Samson to a position of great responsibility, honor, and usefulness; but he must first learn to govern by first learning to obey the laws of God. Joseph was a free moral agent. Good and evil were before him. He could choose the path of purity, holiness, and honor, or the path of immorality and degradation. He chose the right way, and God approved. Samson, under similar temptations, which he had brought upon himself, gave loose rein to passion. The path which he entered upon he found to end in shame, disaster, and death. What a contrast to the history of Joseph!”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, p. 1007.

Read Judges 13:24, 25. Considering what we know about Samson, what important message, and warning, is found in those two texts?

Despite his great promise, Samson allowed his passions and lusts to overcome everything good. Who hasn’t struggled with the reality of this conflict? The great controversy isn’t just a symbol; it depicts the battle between Christ and Satan that is waged, not simply as some cosmic conflict in the heavens but in every human being, as well. Though Christ paved the way for all people to share in His victory, the battle for our hearts and flesh is being fought, indeed, in our hearts and our flesh. Sure, Christ won it all for us. But we have to choose to claim His victory all the time and, by the choices we make, we are deciding for one side or the other in the great controversy.

How are you experiencing the reality of the great controversy in your own heart and flesh? What choices are you making? What do these choices tell you about which side you really are on?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

The concept was popular with Stoic philosophers of the time, who saw it as a way of claiming personal autonomy in face of the impersonal forces of life and nature, including the cold, impassive Being that Stoics imagined God to be.

In contrast, Paul imagined a personal, deeply engaged God who gave us the ability to master ourselves in a way that we otherwise did not have. Paul saw that some of the forces that batted us around at will (those mentioned in *1 John 2:15, 16*, for example) existed inside ourselves. We needed Someone outside ourselves to give us the self-control the Stoics desired, and that Someone was the Holy Spirit.


Consider This: What is the likely result of our attempts to become self-controlled by means of our own willpower and good intentions? (See *Rom. 7:18–25*.)

II. The World (Review *1 John 2:15, 16* and *Romans 12:2* with your class.)

The first step in Christian self-control is the desire to be governed by God rather than what is referred to in the New Testament as the world. *John 3:16* famously tells us that God loved the world. We also are told in *Genesis* that God created the world and saw that it was good. Why, then, does the author of *1 John* tell us that love of the world and love of God cannot exist together in the same heart?

The word used for world in all these instances is the same, *kosmos*. *Kosmos* is actually a fairly neutral word, meaning “order.” This order can be the order that God created in *Genesis* and for which He (*John 3:16*) sacrificed His Son; or it can be a false order, a specious system of values and priorities. Clearly the world, or *kosmos*, referred to in *1 John 2:15, 16* or *Romans 12:2* is the latter.

Used in this context, the world is not merely the place in which we live. It’s the assumptions that govern the actions and beliefs of people who don’t know God. First of all, the world is concerned with the temporary (literally, time bound), while God and His people are concerned with the eternal. Things that are specifically not concerned with God or the eternal are referred to as secular. The word *secular* comes from the Latin word for age. Secular things are those things having to do with this present age, as opposed to eternity. Such things may be necessary for us to attend to and may even have some value in their own right, but if we love God, they are not our ultimate purpose.

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Paul's Long Race

“Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified” (*1 Cor. 9:24–27, NKJV*).

Read prayerfully and carefully Paul's words here to the Corinthians. Notice how much in this he talks about himself and his struggles. We should find comfort in seeing that even a faithful Christian such as Paul, one of the true giants of faith, had to struggle with self, with sin, and with the flesh. We are not alone in our battle. Heaven is going to be filled with people who knew the clamors of the flesh.

Based on the texts above, answer the following questions:

- **What analogy does Paul use to help us understand the battle with self and sin that we all struggle with? What are the crucial differences, though, between the analogy and the reality he's referring to?**

- **How confident was Paul regarding the race he was in? Where did his confidence come from? Why should we have the same confidence?**

- **Though Paul shows confidence, he's also aware of the possibility of failure. How does he describe it, and what is his solution? How does his answer fit in with the theme this week?**

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

Consider This: How should we interact with the world and the things in it? (See *John 15:19*.)

III. Under Foreign Management (Review 1 *John 2:16* with your class.)

When the world and the things in it become our ultimate purpose, we are controlled by them, not by ourselves, and certainly not by God. We become subject to the lusts mentioned in 1 *John 2:15, 16*. Lusts of the flesh, while having a rather steamy connotation today, were not necessarily sexual in nature. We succumb to them when we value physical comfort and pleasure—or their attainment—as our main goals in life.

The “lust of the eyes” implies desires aroused by sight. Again, this is not necessarily referring to pornography or the viewing of things of a prurient nature. Nor is it referring just to things we literally see. Another word for it might be what we call superficiality, a tendency to attribute value to things on the basis of outward appearance, or *seeming*. One even could regard this as the force behind religious hypocrisy, since the hypocrite is interested mainly in *seeming* religious by outward appearance. The same might be said of some forms of legalism, since it often is primarily concerned with how people are *seen* doing the right things or, typically not doing things that *appear* to be wrong.

Closely allied to this is the “pride of life,” which is the overwhelming desire to appear to be superior to other people, in fact, to believe oneself to be superior or at least notable. We see this today in the desire of many people to be famous for *something*, and preferably on television. It might be most accurately referred to as the pride of *this* life, since the victim of this drive regards the achievement of high status and notability in this present age as most important.

Consider This: Even as Christians we are capable of entertaining and becoming captivated by these “worldly” lusts and drives. How are we to react to them when they present themselves? (See *Rom. 13:14*.)

► STEP 3—Apply

Thought Questions:

1 Self-control as taught by the Stoics and others in the ancient world was ascetic and meant to assert the individual’s autonomy. How does this

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How to Grow in Self-Control

“Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us” (*Heb. 12:1, NKJV*). Paul here again uses the race analogy that we saw earlier. What are some of the “weights” that are holding you back?

Read Colossians 3:1–10. These verses give us rules for holy living as new persons in Christ. From these verses we learn several important things we must do to develop self-control in our lives. What do you find listed there, and how can you apply them to your own life in a way that they will help get victory over the sin that so easily encumbers us?

Every skill has to be practiced. Self-control doesn’t come in a day. It comes in hits and misses, in successes and failures, as we try to practice it day after day. “Fight the good fight of faith” (*1 Tim. 6:12, NKJV*); “Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me” (*Phil. 3:12, NKJV*).

Don’t constantly put yourself in places where your weaknesses will be tested, where your most-difficult-to-control drives will be out on the firing line of temptation. We must avoid even the appearance of evil (*1 Thess. 5:22*). “But put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to fulfill its lusts” (*Rom. 13:14*).

What are some areas of your life where self-control is definitely lacking? Why is it sometimes easier to get “victory” over dessert than to get victory over a spirit of bitterness and resentment? What changes can you make that will help you have more self-control?

Learning Cycle CONTINUED

compare with the biblical rationale? (*See 1 Cor. 9:27.*)

2 Compare Joseph and Samson. Joseph faced great trials and misfortunes from an early age yet overcame them to become a great man in both a spiritual and worldly sense. Samson was born with many advantages and yet ended his life as a slave. What does this teach us about how we should use our circumstances to improve ourselves spiritually and glorify God?

Application Questions:

1 We probably will fail at least some of the time as we attempt to learn self-control. How should we react? (*See Prov. 24:16.*)

2 In spite of the fact that self-control is described as a gift, and it is implied that God will help us to learn it, it often seems to be a lonely and difficult process. How can we maintain the connection to God that will make it easier?

3 What are the results of the lack of self-control we see in the world today? Do our society and economic system encourage people to control their impulses and delay gratification, or do they encourage the opposite? How can we insulate ourselves from the multitude of voices goading us to do or buy things that will harm us physically, spiritually, and financially?

► STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: To learn how to control ourselves, we need to know ourselves. We need to know our weaknesses and our strengths and how to minimize the former and maximize the latter. The following activities are meant to give your students the tools to do so.

1 Pass around slips of paper to your class. Ask your students to list anonymously, from one to ten, the things that most cause them to lose self-control. These can be things (food, money, etc.), emotions (frustration, anger, sadness, etc.), situations or people (no individuals, please).

Have everyone pass their slips to the front. List each item on a blackboard and tally the number of times a given thing is mentioned. Your students will see that they are not alone in their struggles and that perhaps they can rely on each other for help.

2 Have members, who are willing, share how they managed to achieve victory over a sin or a problem and how they have managed to maintain it. It can be a big thing or a small thing. What activities, people, or things make them stronger? Weaker?

Further Study: Read Ellen G. White, “Samson,” pp. 560–568, in *Patriarchs and Prophets*.

“The divine promise to Manoah was in due time fulfilled in the birth of a son, to whom the name of Samson was given. As the boy grew up it became evident that he possessed extraordinary physical strength. This was not, however, as Samson and his parents well knew, dependent upon his well-knit sinews, but upon his condition as a Nazarite, of which his unshorn hair was a symbol. Had Samson obeyed the divine commands as faithfully as his parents had done, his would have been a nobler and happier destiny. But association with idolaters corrupted him. The town of Zorah being near the country of the Philistines, Samson came to mingle with them on friendly terms. Thus in his youth intimacies sprang up, the influence of which darkened his whole life. A young woman dwelling in the Philistine town of Timnath engaged Samson’s affections, and he determined to make her his wife. To his God-fearing parents, who endeavored to dissuade him from his purpose, his only answer was, ‘She pleaseth me well.’ The parents at last yielded to his wishes, and the marriage took place.”—Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 562.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ G. Gordon Liddy was one of the infamous Watergate conspirators. Liddy ended up serving more jail time than anyone else in this scandal, which rocked the United States in the 1970s. One time, when trying to recruit a young woman for criminal activity, Liddy invited her to a restaurant. During the discussion, she asked how she could trust him; that is, suppose he were caught, how could she know that he would not turn her in? In order to prove to her his self-control, Liddy placed his finger over a lit candle at the table, and held it there long enough for his flesh to start burning before he removed it. His point was to show her just how much self-control he had. How does that kind of self-control compare with the fruit of the Spirit we have looked at this week? Can we find something noble and worth emulating in that kind of self-control? Are self-control and discipline always necessarily good?
- ❷ In what ways might self-control become a means to fanaticism? How could we avoid the danger of making self-control a form of legalism?
- ❸ Do you know someone who is suffering because of principle; that is, when tempted, they exhibited self-control like Joseph did and are now suffering some difficult consequences? How can you, either as a class or as an individual, help this person through his or her difficult time?