

“FRUITS OF THE SPIRIT: SELF-CONTROL”

Galatians 5:22-23; II Peter 1:1-11

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How much is enough? Just a little bit more: a little more money, a little more house, a little more car, a little more time, a little more food, a little more sex, a little more power, a little more control. The Rolling Stones got it right when they sang, “I can’t get no satisfaction.”

This drive for more isn’t necessarily a bad thing. Beyond wanting more doses of vaccine delivered at a faster rate, we generally want better and more accessible healthcare. We want a better safety net for those not making ends meet. We want better and more accessible education. This desire for a little more spurs advances in medicine, science, technology, and agriculture. It wants more food for people with not enough, more treatment for people who can’t afford it, more living for those who have been excluded: the differently abled, those of all gender identities and sexual orientations, women, minorities and the poor.

But this is not what we’re talking about, when we talk about the need for self-control. As with the other fruits of the spirit, large sectors of our society do not endorse or encourage self-control. The goal for many advertising firms is to create demand for products the public had no idea it wanted. Do I have enough money in my retirement account? Could a new car do more for me? Am I thin enough? Fit enough? Wouldn’t I like my phone to do more for me? Turn out the lights? Lock the doors? Turn on the alarm system? Turn off the alarm system?

Temptation has become very sophisticated in our culture. And very damaging. Imagery in advertising and the film industry emphasizing the perfect figure urge women to buy into diet plans and fitness programs that are often unrealistic and sometimes unhealthy. Failure to achieve this little bit thinner goal may result in social disapproval and lower self-esteem. Failure to achieve any of these things that define success in our society can have harmful effects such as exclusion from certain social classes and opportunities, mockery and social disdain, unemployment, physical and emotional damage. The point here is that there are consequences to refusing to participate in our culture’s thirst for “just a little bit more.’ This undermines the desire for and the practice of self-control. I’m sure you didn’t need to be told how difficult this fruit of the spirit is.

And yet self-control is vital to a full and meaningful spiritual life. Our basic human drive for more knowledge and a better way of living is often carried to excess in the world. Self-control places the necessary restraints on that drive so that we can live together in healthy community. Self-control reminds us that it isn’t all about me.

It’s probably no accident that this list of the fruits of the spirit ends with self-control. The list is modeled on the catalog of virtues found in Greek philosophy. For them, self-control formed the centerpiece for their system of ethics. The good philosopher exercised

restraint because evil arose out of the human attachment to things. The physical world trapped the soul whose true nature was infinite and immortal. They didn't call it "heaven" but the soul's home was in a world separate from this one. Self-control was about letting go of the things of this life so that the soul could rise above it to a truer and better place. Christianity has not yet fully recovered from this mistaken understanding of the life of the spirit.

Jesus had no interest in a future world that was separate and distinct from this one in which we live. He told us that the kingdom of God was among us, that discipleship was really about transforming this life so that it reflected the will and pleasure of God. One way we sum up his teaching is to say that love of God and neighbor will transform the world, but a more practical and concrete way to say this would be: "avoid the excesses."

Peter seems to understand this dynamic of a contrast between this world and the world God desires for us. He writes of the power given to us through Jesus that enables us to "escape from the corruption that is in the world because of lust." The implication here is that one way to live in the world God wants for us to say "no" to just a little bit more, to be satisfied with daily bread.

He goes on to describe a path for living into God's world. He begins with faith, a logical starting point. How do you even start without believing that such a world is possible? He adds to this goodness, the idea that not only such a world exists, but it's a world you want. To this he adds knowledge. How does one take the first steps without some understanding of where this thirst for more has corrupted human community? And then he adds self-control. Knowledge won't get us there without the commitment to act or refrain from acting. Self-control won't help us either unless we add endurance. We have to endure the consequences of refusing to participate in this world's way of acquiring more and more. Perseverance brings godliness and godliness brings mutual affection, and mutual affection brings love. Love tells us that the world God is moving us toward is not unlike the "beloved community" that King and others have lifted up as the goal of Christian discipleship.

It goes without saying that we don't get anywhere along this path without the grace of God, without the urging of the Spirit, and without the faith that sees in ourselves and others that we are children of God, each of blessed with the image of God. But it is precisely because God is active in our lives and the world that we are active participants in the journey to the beloved community.

Each of us would benefit by examining any part of this path, but I want you to notice that self-control and endurance are at the very center of the process. We have not really begun to embody Christ's teaching until we exercise self-control under pressure. Faith, goodness, and knowledge shift our attention and change our priorities, but the living out faith and building up the body of Christ and transforming the world needs disciples exercising self-control. It's where the world gets off-track, and where many of Jesus' followers fall short. It's why the church is often accused of and guilty of hypocrisy. Self-control is the follow-through on the gospel.

There are areas of life where the church has delivered a consistent message on self-control. It has always urged its leaders and members maintain fidelity within marriage, that promiscuous sex was immoral. It's easy to see how these things would undermine community.

It's also easy to see that disciples need to exercise self-control around financial issues. Disparities between rich and poor, inequities between men and women, and differences in economic opportunities among various racial/ethnic groups suggest that the church has a witness to make here. Building the beloved community will mean organizing in ways and around issues that impact income distribution. In other words we should be creating opportunities for those who do not have enough to earn their daily bread.

It's easy to see that Christians should have something to say to the world about its treatment of the earth. For the health of the planet, self-control says use less energy, use renewable resources, eat less meat, stop cutting down the rain forests, plant sustainably. Even climate change deniers can't argue that human beings are not changing the earth. Self-control says treat it well, treat it responsibly, treat it with love as though God created it.

It's easy to see where excesses have caused harm to our planet, to our communities and to ourselves, but I'm wondering if self-control has something unique to say to those of us who already have more than enough?

There's the obvious. One should be a generous giver. One should use one's power to create opportunities for others. One should invest in socially responsible ways. Maybe one should sell all their possessions and give the money to the poor as Jesus told the rich young ruler? Of course, I've never heard anyone say that they had too much. Maybe that's a question we should put to our conscience?

I came across an interesting observation while reading a book by Professor James Cone this past week. He was discussing the meaning of "black power" in his book, *Black Theology and Black Power*. The book was published in 1969, and there was a lot of criticism by the white community when Stokely Carmichael introduced the term to the Civil Rights movement. Cone argues that the criticism was based on unwarranted fear, misunderstanding and deliberate misconstrual of the term. When an oppressed people asserts its own power, they are not trying to overthrow the powers that be, they are establishing their right to equality in power and their common humanity. The term was an attempt to address the psychological harm done to the black community by slavery and Jim Crow, namely their sense of powerlessness in the face of racist practices.

Whatever you may think about his analysis, his next assertion is something we, who have much, should think about. He writes, "It is time for whites to realize that the oppressor is in no position whatever to define the proper response to enslavement.... The time has come for White Americans to be silent and listen to black people" (pp.21-22).

There's a lot to unpack in those two sentences. You may not agree with all of it, but it made me realize that self-control might be something we're called to exercise when addressing disruptions in the beloved community. As people of means, people with resources, abilities and opportunities, we are quick to offer solutions to people who are without. We talk about solving homelessness, addressing poverty and racism. Often we make assumptions about how people feel and what they need that have no basis in fact. Yes, we have a role to play, but is it the role that we've assigned ourselves.

Healthy relationships begin with listening. We forget this when dealing with larger or systemic issues. Self-control for us who have might be as simple as to "stop oppressing." And yet it's not simple, is it? Because we've been too busy solving before we actually understand the problem, or should I say the people.

One irony here is that if we'd done the faith, goodness, and knowledge part of the journey well, we might have known where we needed to exercise more restraint, and what steps we needed to take to build the beloved community. Maybe we needed to remind ourselves that we do believe a better world is possible? Maybe we needed to do a heart check and determine whether our intentions are really well-intentioned or not? Maybe we just needed to do more research.

As people with much, self-control suggests that we be wary of taking more credit for building the community than we deserve. Self-control reminds us that others have important contributions to make. Self-control says to us, "Listen! Don't tell other people what the need, and don't blame them for not choosing your way of handling things."

How much is enough? You won't get a good answer to this question from your financial advisor. You won't get it from your peer group, from your family, or from your parents. Maybe you'll get a better sense as you listen to those who have less: less power, less opportunity, less money. One thing seems clear to me. We will never get to the "mutual affection and love" if we do not take this question seriously and begin to exercise the sort of self-control that seeks the welfare of others. Not everything on the road to the beloved community is pretty or pleasant. But a little enduring self-control may just be the thing that helps us turn a corner from a hurting world to a healing world. May God grant us this kind of success above all others. Amen.

Cone, James H. *Black Theology and Black Power*. Seabury Press: New York, NY, 1969.