

"THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT IS...SELF-CONTROL"

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It may seem as if we've been going down hill. We began these sermons on the dizzy heights of love, joy and peace. Then we plunged to the dreary plateau of patience. We rose a little with kindness. But goodness dropped us another notch. And now we sink into the abyss. Self-control. How far removed that sounds from joy!

Some of you may be familiar with the King James version of the fruits of the Spirit. There the last fruit listed is put down in English as temperance. But, if anything, that sinks us deeper into the valley. The hard truth is that, however we translate it, this final term brings us up against the ascetic side of the Christian lifestyle, the side that has to do with self-discipline, with putting restraints on our desires, our feelings and our behavior, with shaping our existence around the priorities of faith.

This side of the Christian lifestyle is not something that people stand up and cheer about. It doesn't strike the popular fancy. Any week of the year you can find six or eight new songs among the top twenty with the word "love" repeated to the point of nausea. But can you imagine Mick Jagger singing a song called, "self-control"?

In our day the whole notion of self-control runs into heavy resistance. For a long time now we have been passing through a kind of cultural rebellion in which all the old controls are challenged. In one way or another practically everything the pop sociologists tell us about ourselves points to an erosion of self-control as a positive value. When David Riesman spoke of the decline of the "inner-directed man" he pointed a shift in which people governed their lives less by goals within themselves and more by the reactions of the crowd around them. More recently Charles Reich sees us moving into something he calls "Consciousness III". He speaks idyllically about "the recovery of self" in "The Greening of America." But the self that gets recovered does not seem to put much of a premium on what is usually meant by self-discipline. Says Reich, "When the self is recovered, the power of the corporate state will be ended, as miraculously as a kiss breaks a witch's evil enchantment." And how is this miracle to happen? Professor Reich goes on:

"This task does not demand missionary aggressiveness, zeal, and self-sacrifice. Nothing could be farther from the spirit of Consciousness III."

The Greening of America, pp. 318-9.

But we need to go back to a popular sociologist of an earlier generation to see how far we have come from where we used to be. Here is the way Max Weber described the old Puritan outlook on the self in his classic, The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism.

"The Puritan like every rational type of asceticism, tried to enable a man to maintain and act upon his constant motives...against the emotions...Contrary to many popular ideas, the end of his asceticism was to be able to lead an alert, intelligent life: the most urgent task the destruction of spontaneous, impulsive enjoyment, the most important means was to bring order into the conduct of its adherents." p.119

Perhaps this is a caricature of the Puritans. But like most caricatures there is a measure of truth in it even though the measure is out of proportion. The Puritan was not without feeling. On the contrary, in what mattered most to him he was one of the most passionate types ever to enter the stage of history. The Puritan was not mournful. A favorite word of his was "felicity," The Puritan did not deny himself all the pleasures of this world - not even the ones we commonly think he denied.

There was no stauncher Puritan than old Increase Mather. Yet he wrote: "Drink is in itself a good creature of God, and to be received with thankfulness,"

By drink he presumably included that powerful New England rum.

Still we need to finish Increase Mather's sentence:

"but the abuse of drink is from Satan; the wine is from God, but the drunkard is from the devil."

What the Puritan did stress was something he called "sobriety." The term referred not only to moderation in the use of alcohol, but to a whole approach to life in which rigid self-control was operative. And it was here perhaps that he did show a tendency toward "the destruction of spontaneous, impulsive enjoyment."

Now, as I say, we are living through a rebellion against precisely that emphasis. "Spontaneity" and "impulsive enjoyment" are the chief virtues of the hour. This is the age of "serendipity", of "hanging loose", of "liberation" from our "hangups", of getting rid of our "uptightness". This is the age of esalon and sensitivity training, of body language and consciousness expansion. This is the age of the swingers. Such expressions may conjure extreme images in your minds. But the trend of which I speak is not only to be found among "counter-culture" youth. It is observable on all age levels and in most social settings.

Now my purpose is not to assess this cultural rebellion, to say whether it is good or bad or both. I happen to think it is both, but that is not my point today. The point is simply that in such an environment, an environment in which people are knocking down the old inhibitions in the interests of serendipity, it is especially difficult to recognize the need for self-control.

But that need aside, there is a fact of human nature that endures. The only people who accomplish anything in this world are the self-disciplined people, the people who know how to keep their desires and emotions in check, who can deny themselves today for what they hope to achieve tomorrow, who have trained themselves to get the last ounce of energy and talent out of the basic equipment God conferred on them. We can all think of exceptions, people of prodigious talent and energy who accomplished a great deal, but who seemed completely undisciplined in the way they went about things. But there always hangs about these people an air of tragedy arising from the perception of how much more they might have accomplished and how much happier they might have been had they only gained better mastery over themselves. Moreover, there is often more self-discipline present than meets the eye. Most people probably think that Ernest Hemingway spent all his time running around Africa with a bunch of bananas in one hand and a bottle of gin in the other. But when Hemingway was at work on

a book, it was five hours of the most intense work every morning with no interruptions, no booze, no nothing but hard labor.

I suppose the one place left in our culture where we still recognize this facet of human nature is in athletics. We still recognize that you don't get to the Superbowl without tremendous discipline of mind and body. Unfortunately it is the field of athletics that also provides us with some of our more flagrant instances of the loss of self-control, especially on the part of certain coaches. What is missing is a moral control that used to be known as sportsmanship.

That observation leads us to the nub of our concern: self-control as a fruit of the Spirit. Self-control can be a self-serving capacity. I am sure that many of the most ruthless people in history did a great deal more damage than they might otherwise have done because of their tremendous self-mastery.

Christian self-control has a different focus. It is based on an allegiance beyond the self. It is a life that achieves balance and clarity because it is illumined by faith.

It is said that when Michelangelo painted the Sistine Chapel he wore a candle attached to a cap on his head. It was the only way he could keep his shadow from obscuring his work.

The reason we need self-control is simply that our shadows do tend to get in the way, the shadows of random impulse that obscure the work we really want to do and prevent us from becoming the kind of persons that in the depths of our selves we truly want to be. But when we give ourselves in allegiance to God, then the Spirit acts like that candle in Michelangelo's cap. "In his light we see light." The obscuring shadow is cast away.