

Series: The Fruit of the Spirit

Title: Goodness, Faithfulness, and Self-Control: The God-ward and Self-ward Dispositions

Text: Galatians 5:22-23

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The last few fruit of the Spirit deal with what we could call “God-ward” and “self-ward” virtues. It may seem strange to think of the fruit of the Spirit in this way, but such a perspective is rooted in a Christian understanding of Jesus’ famous “Great Commandment.” According to the teaching of our Lord, both a healthy focus on God and self are necessary for living a life pleasing to God. Most are familiar with the way in which God is at the center of the Great Commandment. Jesus indeed said, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and most important command” (Matthew 22:37-38).

Most overlook the place of “self” in the Great Commandment. They glide right over Jesus’ mention of loving “your neighbor as *yourself*” (Matthew 22:39). Our Lord’s words imply that a healthy regard for self is necessary for healthy and holy living. Sure, most don’t need any assistance in this endeavor, as most naturally care for themselves in a sufficient manner. However, our Lord’s greatest command informs us that a life of godliness will take self into account.

Paul’s list of the fruit of the Spirit is in concert with these realities. He listed several virtues that pertained to the first part of the Great Commandment — a love for God. Such virtues can be thought of as including love, joy, peace, goodness, and faithfulness. He also listed some virtues that dealt with one’s relationship with others, the second part of the Great Commandment. These include patience, kindness, and gentleness. Finally, Paul added one virtue to his list that dealt with the self — self-control.

The Spirit of God is the means by which all of the aforementioned virtues are produced. As a result, it is ultimately the Holy Spirit that enables believers to fulfill Jesus’ Great Commandment. To fulfill the Law and the Prophets (Matthew 22:40), believers must remain dependent on the Third Person of the Trinity. In this portion of our study, we are going to talk about two God-ward virtues (goodness and faithfulness) and one self-ward virtue (self-control).

GOODNESS

In modern times, the word “good” is often regarded as being overly generic. It isn’t saying much to say something is “good.” Well-meaning English teachers have warned students to use more meaningful superlatives for decades. Indeed, there are stronger words to express the value of something in our language. “Goodness” is perhaps a bit trite nowadays.

When it comes to spiritual matters, however, the word “good” is good. In fact, Paul used the term to depict one of the outcomes of the Spirit-directed life. He said “goodness” is one of the fruit of the Spirit. Far from being a generic term in the first-century world, the word referred to a quality of moral excellence.¹ The attribute was concerned with one’s disposition or character.² Thus, it referred to uprightness and generosity in speech and conduct.³

Goodness is Godliness

The quality was closely related to that of the aforementioned “kindness,” but there was a distinction between the two virtues. If you remember, kindness was thought of as involving a

¹ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, 30.

² Zodhiates, 63.

³ Gingrich and Danker, 2.

mellowing of the character. A kind person has a disposition that has been calmed to the point that the person is more considerate and gracious toward others. Goodness is different. It builds on top of such kindness. Whereas kindness involves a mellowing of the character, goodness involves an energizing of the character. One has said, the virtue involves “active goodness as an energetic principle.”⁴ Through goodness one is enlivened to do God’s will, to do good, and to fulfill the Lord’s Moral Law.

This is really the issue with goodness — it is the virtue that results from one fulfilling God’s Law. When one is led by the Spirit, one will inadvertently be led to do “all the Law and the Prophets” require (Matthew 22:40). The resultant state of one’s lifestyle will be one of moral excellence. The Spirit will produce character that matches the character of God. Plain and simple, the fruit of goodness involves the manifestation of God’s goodness in our lives through the presence of His Spirit in our lives.

In a world in which moral boundaries are becoming more and more fast and loose, it is worth pausing to reflect on the fact that the Lord wants our lives to mirror His goodness. The prevailing philosophy of pragmatism has caused many to doubt whether the Lord has any moral expectations or desires for our lives. The fruit of goodness reminds us that our Heavenly Father desires for us to live in ways that conform to His Moral Law. He wants us to live good, decent, moral, and clean lives that reflect His nature. Never believe the lie that God isn’t concerned with our lifestyles.

Avoiding the Legalism Trap

If there is one caveat to be made in reference to the place of goodness in our lives, it is this — the source of such goodness. Such was precisely Paul’s concern. The legalists of the day were boasting of a goodness that came from the flesh. The apostle wanted his readers to have a deeper, more meaningful goodness. He wanted them to be in tune with the Spirit’s role in producing the moral excellence the Lord desires.

The New Testament emphatically holds the place of moral goodness in the lives of believers. In Romans 15:14, Paul told the Romans, “You also are full of goodness.” His intent was to show that the virtue in view was indeed a mark of mature Christian living. In writing to the Ephesians, he said, “... for the fruit of the light consists of all goodness” (Ephesians 5:9). In doing so, he used another metaphor to convey a list of important godly virtues.

Moral goodness is God’s will for the life of every believer. There is no way around this reality. Our Heavenly Father wants us to live in accordance with His Moral Law (Exodus 20:1-17). He wants our lives to reflect His holy character. The only concern in all of this is the method by which we pursue such goodness. Many have shunned calls for holiness in our day out of a fear of “legalism.” Indeed, God’s people must be on guard against the trap of the Judaizers. We do not want to be like the Galatians — ensnared by a dead religion that mandates empty rules and rituals. Real godly goodness can never be produced by jumping through the hoops of Pharisaical religion.

A Spirit-Generated Virtue

Again, this was actually Paul’s concern in writing to the Galatians. He wanted his readers to pursue goodness, but he wanted them to do it through the Lord’s methods and means. The Spirit was the only resource the Christians at Galatia had for the pursuit of good, godly character. The Galatians needed to “walk by the Spirit” in order to have lives that mirrored the holy character of God.

⁴ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 431.

When writing to the Thessalonians, Paul shared his prayer for his readers. In doing so, he made a passing reference to the way in which the Holy Spirit is the means by which believers are made to live good lives. He said, “In view of this, we always pray for you that our God will make you worthy of his calling, and by his power fulfill your every desire to do *good* and your work produced by faith” (2 Thessalonians 1:11). The apostle’s prayer used the same Greek word translated “goodness” in his list of the fruit of the Spirit.

The meaning is obvious for us. The Third Person of the Trinity is our means of living good lives that please God and give Him glory in a dark world. If we expect to see even a smidgen of sanctified living in our lives, we must look to the Spirit for help. By ourselves, we are not good, but Christ has made us good, and He can make us even more good by His Spirit within us.

We should indeed have an aversion to modern legalism. But, we must be careful to not throw the proverbial baby out with the bath water. I’ve heard modern Christians often joke about those who are of the more legalistic sort by speaking of those who “don’t cuss, chew, or run with girls who do!” Such axioms probably have a place, as we want to avoid the stuffy legalism of a bygone era in American Christianity. However, we must not go so far as to think God has little concern regarding how we live. He indeed wants us to pursue “goodness,” but such moral excellence isn’t produce through empty, legalistic religion. It grows via the presence of the Spirit in one’s life.

FAITHFULNESS

I once heard of a personal study that categorized personalities on the basis of different dog breeds. Fierce defenders of family and institutions were identified as a German shepherds. Exuberant outgoing personalities were regarded as Jack Russell terriers. Cocker spaniels represented the rule-following type. You get the picture. On particular profile always stood out to me — a golden retriever stood for faithfulness and loyalty!

When we study Scripture, we find that faithfulness is a disposition God has toward His people (1 Corinthians 1:9). We can rightfully sing, “Great is thy faithfulness.” In addition to being a disposition of God toward His children, faithfulness is to be a disposition of God’s children toward God. Faithfulness should be reciprocal on the part of those who are born again. They are called to live with great loyalty to the Lord. It is for this reason that Paul listed “faithfulness” as the seventh fruit of the Spirit.

Faith that Saves

Interestingly, the Greek term Paul used to speak of faithfulness was the same one used to speak of the faith involved in salvation. It appeared in Ephesians 2:8 when Paul said, “For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God’s gift” (Ephesians 2:8). Used in regard to salvation, the term referred to the trust or reliance that brings salvation from sin. Indeed, faith is the virtue that imparts the righteousness of God to man. Romans 1:17 used the same term from Paul’s fruit of the Spirit list to say, “the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, just as it is written: The righteous will live by faith.”

Action vs. Adjective

While faith can be thought of in terms of a dependency on God and His plan of redemption, it can also be thought of in another way. In one sense, Biblical faith can involve an action — trusting or relying on God. In another sense, it can involve an adjective — being one others can trust, being trustworthy or reliable. This second sense of faith is what Paul referred to when he spoke of the fruit of “faithfulness.” The Greek word he used was one that often spoke of one

who was reliable or loyal.⁵ His focus was on the virtues of sincerity and dependability.⁶ He meant to depict one marked by fidelity, one in whom others could have good faith.⁷

Such loyalty toward the Lord is important. Our Heavenly Father scans the souls of men and women, looking for those who are faithful toward Him (2 Chronicles 16:9). He gets great praise and pleasure from those who are loyal to Him and His truth. The Proverbs proclaim, “Lying lips are detestable to the Lord, but faithful people are his delight” (Proverbs 12:22).

Faithful to the Faith

Jesus Himself extolled the virtue of faithfulness. In His teaching, He rebuked the Pharisees for having an active, ceremonial religion that was devoid of true loyalty to God. He said, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! You pay a tenth of mint, dill, and cumin, and yet you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy, and faithfulness” (Matthew 23:23). Perhaps Paul had Jesus’ words in mind as he wrote to the Galatians. He knew some of the Judaizers promoted a legalistic religion at the expense of true soul-oriented faithfulness to the Lord.

The legalists were beckoning some to depart from a pure devotion to the gospel. In the beginning of his letter, Paul felt compelled to say, “I am amazed that you are so quickly turning away from him who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— not that there is another gospel, but there are some who are troubling you and want to distort the gospel of Christ” (Galatians 1:6-7). The church was faced with a crises. Would they chose to remain faithful to Christ and the cross, or would they veer off course? Would they live by a rule-oriented, man-made religion, or would they stick to message of the apostles? The church needed faithfulness in the face of error. The Spirit of God was the resource they needed to cultivate such faithfulness.

In some of his other writings, Paul also lifted up the importance of sincere loyalty to the Lord. When writing to his preacher apprentice Timothy, he encouraged the young man to have “faith” in standing against gospel opponents who had “shipwrecked” the faith (1 Timothy 1:19). Like the faithful at Galatia, Timothy needed to remain loyal to the truth of God. Times of apostasy call God’s people to be virtuous. A firm faithfulness to the Lord and His Word is the need when others are pulling away from the truth.

Only the Spirit of God can produce true loyalty of heart and mind. In other places in the New Testament, Paul told of the way in which the Lord had graciously worked this virtue into his own soul. In 1 Timothy 2:7, he said, “I was appointed a herald, an apostle (I am telling the truth; I am not lying), and a teacher of the Gentiles in *faith* and truth.” In 2 Timothy 3:10, he gave testimony of his, “teaching, conduct, purpose, *faith*, patience, love, and endurance.” Being faithful to God’s truth may be hard when it seems the entire world is denying God’s truth, but help is available from the Holy Spirit.

Faithful unto Death

John Hooper was a bishop within the church of England during the sixteenth century. As providence would have it, his ministry intersected with the rise of Queen Mary I to the throne of England and Ireland. Mary is now know as “Bloody Mary” to many who study history. In her zeal to restore Catholicism to her homeland, she instituted what are now called “the Marian persecutions.”

⁵ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 431.

⁶ Zodhiates, 1163.

⁷ Zodhiates, 1163.

Because Mary blamed her mother's death on her father's Protestant leanings, she murderously sent many Protestant pastors to the executioner's stake. John Hopper was one victim of the bloodthirsty queen. Though the pastor was a humble and wise man who devoted himself feverishly to studying and proclaiming God's Word, his Scriptural convictions did not square with the monarchy's.

On February 9, 1554, Hooper met the sting of death. The night before his earthly departure, a friend visited him in his cell in order to encourage him to recant and save his life. He begged, "Consider that life is sweet, and death is bitter. Life hereafter may do good." Hooper replied, "The life to come is more sweet, and the death to come is more bitter."

The next morning, the faithful pastor was paraded through the streets of his home parish. His own congregants watched as he was prepped for burning. Onlookers heard him utter the following prayer, "My Lord and God, what terrible pains and cruel torments be prepared for Thy creature; such, Lord, as without Thy strength none is able to bear... Therefore, strengthen me of Thy goodness; or else assuage the terror of the pains, as shall seem most to Thy Glory."

Witnesses told of the way in which the pastor submitted himself to the flames rather than recanting the faith. They saw his lips shrink to his gums and the fire ascended up his neck. The scene was horrific. One witness told of the way in which fat, water, and blood dropped from the pastor's finger tips. Shortly before he died, he beat his chest with one of his hands until it fell off, yet Hooper remained faithful to the Word of God until the end.⁸

How did a human endure such torment? Did you hear his prayer? He relied on the Spirit of God to keep him steadfast. Only God can give a person true loyalty and fidelity to His truth. May we seek the Spirit's assistance in developing a faithfulness to the faith.

Remaining Faithful amongst Great Unfaithfulness

The fruit of faithfulness is particularly needed in the day and age in which we live. The truth of the Bible, the person of Christ, and the gospel of Jesus all seem to be misrepresented and maligned more now than ever. We are like the first-century church of Thyatira, to whom John wrote (Revelation 2:18-29). We are immersed in a world of great error and evil. Spiritual, moral, and intellectual falsehood abound. Though our society has advanced scientifically, economically, and in other regards as well, it seems we have regressed spiritually and morally. May we, like the believers of Thyatira, display a degree of faithfulness in a corrupt culture (Revelation 2:19).

The climate of our culture has led many professing Christians to acquiesce to the spirit of the age. It seems the ranks of those who are unfaithful to the plain teaching of Scripture are swelling. Many, whether they realize it or not, are disloyal to the gospel, the Great Commandment, and the Great Commission. May the Spirit of the Lord rend our hearts and create an abiding faithfulness within us. The pressures of contemporary society call us to what the book of Revelation calls "faithfulness from the saints" (Revelation 13:10). May we seek the Spirit's help in developing this virtue.

SELF-CONTROL: THE SELF-WARD FRUIT

Self-control was the final fruit in Paul's list of Spirit-produced virtues. The Greek term underlying English translations referred to continence or temperance, the ability to suppress one's desires. The word was used especially in regard to sexual matters.⁹ In speaking of such control, Paul

⁸ Ryle, J.C. *Five English Reformers*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1960), 61-81.

⁹ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, [CD-Rom].

brought his discussion to a fitting conclusion. His list came full circle from his previous discussion of the works of the flesh (Galatians 5:19-21). Whereas the flesh produced things like “sexual immorality,” “moral impurity,” “promiscuity,” and “carousing,” the Spirit could give self-control over such things.

Self-Control and The Sexual Revolution

We live in a generation in which sexual self-expressions are openly flaunted and celebrated. It is perceived to be a human right for one to follow their sexual passions according to their own whims and wishes. The philosophy of the day maintains that the suppression of any sexual urge is unnecessarily restrictive at best. Some would even maintain that suppression of the sex drive is repressive to one’s own true identity, and possibly destructive to one’s psyche. Even the government in the United States is now involving itself in granting rights that allow the free pursuit of sexual passions and perversions.

The rule of the day goes against the Creator’s plan for creation. An observation of biology and the created order, along with a study of God’s Word, reveal that sexual intercourse is a God-given gift. Through it, humans, who have a significance that far exceeds the one belonging to the animal kingdom, are given a capacity to multiply and fill the earth. All of this is a part of God’s plan. It is His intention to get glory for Himself through humankind who has been created in His image (Genesis 1:26-27).

Self-Control and Spiritual Warfare

Unfortunately, humanity has been duped by Satan (Genesis 3:1). Knowing God’s plan to send redemption through the reproductive process (Genesis 3:15), Satan has tirelessly worked to pervert what God has intended for procreation and pleasure within the marriage covenant (Proverbs 5:15-19). Through his three-fold Satanic value system, he has duped many into living for “the lust of the flesh” (1 John 2:16).

Tragically, Satan’s schemes are reaching a crescendo before our very eyes. Twenty-first century society now resembles ancient Sodom and Gomorrah. The faithful are tempted to ask with Abraham if there are even fifty righteous people left in the land (Genesis 18:24). What we are experiencing is the end result of people worshipping the created order over the creator (Romans 1:25). Our society is lost because people are looking to fleshly desires for directives instead of looking to the Father’s decrees.

Self-Control = Holding In

The Greek word rendered “self-control” in Galatians 5:23 has been famously translated “temperance” by the King James Version of the Bible. Unfortunately, that rendering has made the meaning of the fruit of the Spirit to be associated with alcohol. Because of the “temperance” and prohibition movement in early twentieth-century American history, many have assumed that the final fruit of the Spirit is primarily concerned with the consumption of strong drink. While there are certainly dangers associated with alcohol consumption (Proverbs 23:31-35), and while God’s Word instructs us to have vigilance and self-control in such matters (Ephesians 5:18, 1 Timothy 3:8), we must be clear that the fruit of the Spirit in our text is concerned primarily with controlling sexual desire.

The Greek word rendered “self-control” can be thought of as referring to continence (the act of holding something in) in regard to one’s desire. Thus, the idea expressed by the virtue is one of holding in one’s desires, of restraining one’s impulses. The self-control the Spirit

produces results in a “holding in of passions and appetites.”¹⁰ Specifically, it entails a restraint of ungodly and unlawful sexual desire.

The world often excuses sexual deviancy on the basis of personal choice and desire. Even the most abhorrent of all perversions are being excused in the name of personal preference. Scripture reveals that God has a standard for sexual morality. His design is best. It works. Perversions of His plan only lead to brokenness and pain. Those who persist in transgressing God’s Moral Law in these matters do so because of their own surrender to their own sinful passions. Self-control is needed.

In 2 Peter 1:6, Peter encouraged believers to grow in their understanding and experience of self-control. He said, “For this reason, make every effort to supplement your faith with goodness, goodness with knowledge, knowledge with self-control, self-control with endurance...” (2 Peter 1:5-6). Believers are called to develop their spiritual capacities for self-control. They aren’t to live like the rest of the world, constantly pushed and pulled by the passions and promptings of their mere humanity.

Self-Control and Salvation

Would you believe me if I told you that self-control has a place in gospel presentations? Have you ever spoken on the subject when witnessing to someone? When Paul shared the gospel with a Roman official named Felix, he spoke on the subject. Interestingly, the apostle used the same Greek word from Galatians 5:23 in his gospel presentation. The book of Acts says Paul reasoned with the man “about righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come” (Acts 24:25).

Why did Paul speak on such a subject when trying to lead an unbeliever to conversion? Why didn’t he simply tell Felix, “Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved.” Such was his *modus operandi* in witnessing to a jailer in Philippi (Acts 16:31). Why talk about believing in Jesus on one occasion while talking about self-control on another? The reason for Paul’s mention of self-control when witnessing to the Roman official is obvious when one peers beneath the surface. The man needed to be convicted of sin. Since the Philippian jailer was convinced of his need for salvation, it was fitting for Paul to say, “Believe in the Lord Jesus.”

The jailer saw his need for salvation, but Felix did not. Paul spoke on the man’s besetting sin — lack of self-control — in attempt to wake to his need for Christ. The man undoubtedly lived a licentious and lust-driven life. He was likely guilty of violating God’s Moral Law regarding adultery and covetousness (Exodus 20:14, 17). He probably had a conscience that accused him of these things from time to time (Romans 2:14-16). He seemed to have some regret and remorse at hearing Paul’s preaching. The Bible tells us, “Felix became afraid” (Acts 24:25); however, the man never exhibited the godly sorrow that leads to repentance.

Paul’s method of preaching reveals that the issue of self-control is a grave matter that often keeps people from God. Unredeemed humanity is cut off from the Lord because of their inability to control desires related to the lust of the flesh. The need for temperance and continuance is indicative of the fact that men and women are naturally in a state of spiritual death. To gain victory in the area of self-control, new life is necessary. One must be born again (John 3:3). It is only when the Spirit of God enters into a soul that one gains the ability to reign in the desires of self.

Is Self-Control Self-Centered?

Some struggle to understand how the Spirit could produce self-control. The logic goes like this — since the word “self-control” contains the word “self,” self-control is suspect. Any notion of

¹⁰ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, ?.

anything involving self is thought to be inherently evil. Since when does anything good come from “self?” How can there be any benefit in self-control, considering the fact that Paul said, “nothing good lives in me” (Romans 7:18)?

Those who advocate that the King James Version is the only suitable English translation often protest on this very point. Since their favorite Bible translation uses the word “temperance,” they feel they have a spiritual high ground on those who use other translations. Their reasoning often goes like this — “The King James Version says, “temperance.” Modern translations say, “self-control.” Self is depicted as being bad in the Bible; therefore, modern translations are inferior.”

Such arguments and distinctions are unnecessary. God is not bound to the confines of the English language. The fruit of self-control can be defined as either “temperance” or “self-control.” Plain and simple, the virtue deals with restraining one’s desires. There is no need for proverbial hair splitting. What’s important is that Christians understand the real nature of the fruit.

Aversion to the word “self” is necessary when one also considers the classifications Paul appears to have used in his list of spiritual fruit. As mentioned earlier in this study, Paul’s fruit of the Spirit seems to align itself with Christ’s Great Commandment (Matthew 22:37-40). Several of the fruit are God-ward — love, joy, peace, goodness, and faithfulness (Matthew 22:37). Others on Paul’s list were directed toward people — patience, kindness, and gentleness (Matthew 22:39a). One was directed toward the final person mentioned in the Great Commandment (“self”) — self-control (Matthew 22:39b).

For the reasons above, it should not seem strange that Paul extolled a self-oriented virtue. One does not need to regard self-control as being self-centered. Paul’s point was simply that the Holy Spirit could give one power to control the passions and promptings of self. The fruit of the Spirit is not generated by self, but it is concerned with self. It can give a person power over self-centeredness and other self-oriented things. Paul’s intent was not to espouse a man-centered form of self-mastery. It was simply his intent to make his readers aware of how the Holy Spirit could give them power over the desires that emanated from self.

Spiritual Power Over Self

So, self-control is a result of the Spirit-driven life. What does that mean for us? Plain and simple, Paul’s words teach us that we can have power over fallen desires by the Holy Spirit. Though the self is ultimately incapable of abstaining from “sinful desires that wage war against the soul” (1 Peter 2:11), the Spirit of God can help. He can supernaturally empower a person. He can change desires, thoughts, and intentions that seem to have a stronghold on the human soul. Though victory over fallen desires may seem impossible in one’s mere humanity, the Third Person of the Trinity can make all things new. Learn to “walk by the Spirit” (Galatians 5:16), and you can gain power over the lusts that seem so strong.