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1 Corinthians 9:24-27

**Fruit of the Spirit: Antidote for the Modern World:
Self-Control**



As we continue seeking to cultivate the Fruit of the Spirit within our lives, we encounter an unachievable challenge from Paul in his letter to the Corinthians: self-control.

Christianity has a paradoxical relationship with this concept. On the one hand we are unequivocally told not to sin, to avoid temptation, and to let no evil talk come out of our mouths. On the other hand, we are unequivocally told this is impossible.

Paul bares his soul in regard to this truth in his letter to the Romans, *"I do not understand my own actions. ...For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do."* Romans 7:15, 19. This means with regards to being faithful to God it is utterly outside of human possibility. Again, in Romans, *"No one is righteous not even one."* This is critical to our understanding of salvation, for it means every part of our salvation, even our faith in God, *"is not our own doing it is a gift from God."* (cf. Ephesians 2:8).

Rev. Dr. Jim Goodloe, founder of the Reformed Theological Institute, writes:

*It is this singular incapacity that Martin Luther and John Calvin understood to be the terrible sounding "bondage of the will." We may enjoy other freedoms of the will, such as what to eat for dinner this evening. **But in this***

one important thing that we most need to do, to choose to return to God, or, ... we are not free so to choose or to act. Jesus tells us this from and by his cross. Given the horrible death of Jesus Christ, it must be the case that we humans are beyond any form of self-help. Or, to say this another way around: If we were at all capable of returning to God on our own, wouldn't that very capacity mean that we did not need the death of Jesus Christ to be saved?

We must begin any conversation about self-control with this foundation. Otherwise, we inevitably become self-righteous. In our Corinthians text Paul tells us to exercise self-control to receive an imperishable prize. That prize is not salvation, as we have said it only come as a gift from God.

Our self-control will never be sufficient to earn our salvation, but it can help us cooperate with the Spirit of God within us on our journey to growing into God. The journey of manifesting the Fruit of the Spirit. The imperishable prize is becoming this person filled with the love of God.

But self-control is hard. As anyone who has ridden the subway can attest people have a very hard time exercising self-control. We all have challenges. But perhaps the hardest act of self-control is taming the tongue. James tells us

in his epistle it sets on fire the wheel of time! But the tongue does not speak on its own. Jesus tells us the tongue is a reflection of our heart.

And so, the ultimate goal of self-control is to reshape our heart.

This morning we will chart out a practical path for exercising self-control to reshape our heart.

A few years ago, brothers Chip and Dan Heath wrote, *Switch: How to Change Things When Change Is Hard*. In it they explain several key concepts for helping us change our behavior. First, self-control is exhaustible – we have only so much will power to do the good or resist temptation. Just like we can only lift so much weight, we can only screw up our will so far. They cited a social experiment testing people's ability to resist the temptation of eating cookies.

They gathered college students, some who were to eat only radishes and others who were to eat only cookies. They left them alone for a few minutes and everyone had the will power to do as they were told! But then they shifted the parameters. Under the cover of creating a brand-new experiment they asked all participants to try and solve a maze. It had no solution, but they did not tell them that! This was to measure their level of frustration! The cookie eaters who did not have to resist temptation earlier tried for 19 minutes! But the radish eaters gave up after only 8 minutes! They already exhausted their self-control!

This means if we have large spiritual goals in our life, to be more loving, exude more joy, and know more peace – then we need to

focus our limited supply of self-control over these items that truly matter.

This requires a measure of self-examination to discern which prizes you are racing for, and which races you are encouraging your children to run. NYC people work very hard very long hours. You want to be successful and to have a comfortable living; and these pursuits according to scripture are part and parcel of being human. But just like everyone has different levels of physical stamina so too does everyone have different levels of mental fortitude. Know your limits! In the midst of the races you choose to run don't run them so hard that there is nothing left in your tank to run for the imperishable prize of the Spirit of God in your heart.

In order to channel our limited actions into more productive outcomes it means creating a context in which our need for constant self-control is limited.

This leads us to the second key concept from the Heath brothers — context matters.

In another experiment they gave movie goers different mammoth sized popcorn buckets filled with wretched greasy five-day old popcorn. They were all too big for any one person to finish but even though it was awful the one's with larger buckets ate 53% more!

This means the context in which we live effects our actions and therefore influences the amount of self-control we need to exercise.

When you are seeking to have more self-control over your actions and your moral behavior, work to shape your environment to

decrease your temptation. Know your weak spots and minimize the risk.

If your propensity is to lash out at people through frustration, never ever go to the DMV! If it is endless shopping, limit your time on the computer. If it is something more unsettling and harmful, plan ahead, find a source of support and avoid the context of temptation.

With only a limited amount of self-control and the need to exercise it carefully in well thought out contexts, we need to be especially tactical to hone in the behavior we seek to accomplish.

The third key gleaned by the Heath brothers is the need to be specific. The rather vague Biblical instruction from Paul, "*run for an imperishable prize*" may lead us to run in circles instead.

Another study the Heath brothers illuminated had to do with the campaign some decades ago trying to get people to change their eating habits. It was clear the generic admonition to "eat healthier" was not helping. In their research they discovered the critical importance of reducing saturated fat. At the time of the study, they realized only one change in the American diet would achieve this goal- Drink skim or 1% milk.

They launched a directed campaign and made great strides in creating healthier diets through specific attainable goals.

We too must be specific in seeking to grow the Fruit of the Spirit in our hearts.

Perhaps you have the Biblical goal of being more generous. Change this broad goal into a measurable outcome through choosing a cause for which you are passionate, pledging an amount and writing the check the same time each month. This is important. Write it! Don't auto debit. That action of writing the check will be the action that trains your heart and will to this discipline.

Examine your feelings when you write that check. Perhaps it's easy and brings you a sense of completeness and thanksgiving. Alternatively, perhaps you struggle each month to add all those zeros to the end. Look for that source of anxiety. Examine your fear. Pray it up to God. Rinse and repeat for a year and chart your progress.

Perhaps you have the Biblical goal of being more kind, but your actions never change. Begin by pledging to say something uplifting every time you check out at the grocery store or to respond with kind words every time someone snaps at you. Plan your words in advance. Look the person in the eye when you offer those words. Then return home and reflect on your Spirit when you spoke them to discover if you were sincere or simply reciting them. Then pray. Chart your responses for six months to see your progress.

We all only have so much self-control. Strategize and prioritize your challenges. Be tactical and directed to achieve your goals. Not for temporal gain but run and win the one race that ultimately matters. Amen.