

Lesson 9

Faithfulness, Gentleness and Self-Control

In nature, new trees do not normally bear fruit in the early years. In fact, you would have to wait five years to see a pear or apple on your young tree, and there wouldn't be much you could do to change that. That's how God made trees to bear fruit. If you are a new Christian, you may feel a lot like a young apple tree: fruitless and useless, but with lots of potential. The good news is that if you remain in the Vine (stay steadfast in your relationship with Jesus Christ) you *will* bear fruit. Reread John 15:1-17. The Christian life is a long process of allowing God to "prune" us to make us more fruitful. As we accept correction from the Holy Spirit and respond with obedience and submission, we develop a strong, healthy life full of luscious fruit. Read Psalm 1:1-3. To what is the righteous man compared and how is he described?

Don't be discouraged if you examine your life at this point and see very little fruit or no fruit at all. If Christ has truly changed your heart, you will begin to see changes in your life, and the fruit of the Spirit will become more and more evident. Fruit-bearing is something that comes from the inside. You can't make it happen in an instant by your own will, just as you can't force a fruit tree to bear fruit before it's ready. You must allow God to do His work in His time. Your responsibility is to cooperate with what God is trying to do in you.

"But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23). So far, you've learned about six of the nine components of the fruit of the Spirit. You learned that love is not something you feel, but something you do. That's why God can command us to love one another — He doesn't order us to *feel* a certain way, but to *act* a certain way. It is often difficult to control our feelings, but we can always control our actions with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us. You learned that true joy comes only from having a relationship with Jesus Christ and walking in obedience. Joy isn't something we seek, but the by-product of following in Christ's footsteps and something we strive to give to others. Likewise, peace is a virtue we should pursue and promote among others. True inner peace is an overflow of a right relationship with God. Can you see how every virtue of the Christian life is entirely

dependent on your relationship with Jesus Christ? Salvation is the foundation for your fruitfulness.

In the last course, you learned that patience requires a constant trust in, and reliance on, God. Kindness is an expression of moral excellence (a quality that is only possible if Christ lives in you) that makes us useful in His service. Goodness describes the quality of a life that is devoted to the will of God and seeks for His truth to be made known. These six qualities, along with faithfulness, gentleness and self-control, make up the fruit of the Spirit. And it is these qualities you should expect to see in your life as you grow in your relationship with Christ. They all begin on the inside as the result of being made a new creature (2 Corinthians 5:17), and they all are expressed in actions that draw others to Christ.

Faithfulness

The American Heritage Dictionary defines faithfulness as loyal, worthy of trust, reliable and steadfast. These are admirable qualities and should certainly describe the Christian, but the meaning in Galatians 5:22 is much richer. The actual word used in the Greek is simply "faith." Look up the following verses and write down what you learn about faith.

Matthew 17:20

Luke 17:5-6

Acts 3:16

Romans 14:2, 23

2 Corinthians 5:7

Galatians 2:20

Ephesians 6:16

2 Thessalonians 1:3

1 Peter 1:7

1 John 5:4

The “faith” we’re talking about here is not “saving faith,” that initial trust you put in Christ to forgive your sins and to give you a new life. Saving faith is a prerequisite for the Holy Spirit in your life, not the product as described in Galatians 5:22. This faith, which is part of the fruit of the Spirit, is the faith that accomplishes the impossible, moves mountains, sustains through crisis and moves the heart of God.

First, *faith is confidence*. How does Hebrews 11:1 define faith?

When we have this kind of faith, we can take God at His Word and put our total trust in Him to fulfill His promises — even when that trust seems unreasonable to the human mind. Hebrews 11, the great faith chapter of the New Testament, is filled with examples of godly men and women from the Old Testament who had that kind of faith. They all had a confident assurance that God’s purposes would be fulfilled. What do you learn from these verses about their faith?

Hebrews 11:13-16

Hebrews 11:24-26

Hebrews 11:39

The faith produced by the Holy Spirit is always forward-looking. It sees past the temporal, earthly circumstances, to the eternal, heavenly realities. It doesn't demand instant answers or immediate rewards. Faith is walking in obedience, often blindly, with a confidence that God can do something far greater through us and for us than we could ever do for ourselves.

Without the Holy Spirit, our faith is limited to our own abilities. We have faith in what we are capable of doing or in what others are capable of doing for us. Our confidence is in the flesh and we never step beyond the limits of what we can accomplish by our own power. Sadly, many Christians never step across the line from self-sufficiency to faith. They maintain the old adage, "God helps those who help themselves" (which, incidentally, is *not* found in the Bible), and so they never live out a life of true faith.

Faith from the Holy Spirit is a confidence in God and what *He* can do. According to Ephesians 3:20, what is God able to do?

Faith doesn't know the meaning of the word "impossible," because it is a confidence in God, not self. Where we are weak, He is strong.

Second, *faith implies conviction*. In Romans 14, Paul discusses personal convictions. Some Jewish converts to Christianity still felt compelled to observe the dietary restrictions they had grown up with, while others felt no compulsion to do so. Paul cautions the Christian who is "stronger" in his faith to do nothing that will put a stumbling block in front of his "weaker" brother, causing him to sin by compromising his convictions. He sums up his argument in Romans 14:23, "But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin." Here, faith is closely aligned with conviction.

There is a great difference between a conviction and a preference. A preference changes with the circumstances, but a conviction is something you would die defending. There are some matters, such as eating meat or considering some days more sacred than others, says Paul, that are negotiable. But even in these seemingly trivial matters, "Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind" (Romans 14:5). With the help of the Holy Spirit, we develop convictions. The one caution Paul gives is this: "Blessed is the man who does

not condemn himself by what he approves" (Romans 14:22). We can't live consistent Christian lives if everything is only a preference. True faith develops convictions.

What are some of the nonnegotiable fundamentals of which we must be thoroughly convinced or persuaded?

Acts 2:36

Romans 8:38-9:1

1 Corinthians 15:11-58

2 Corinthians 5:14

2 Timothy 1:12

2 Timothy 3:12-17

Titus 1:2

1 John 4:2-3a

Faith is not just consenting to some facts, it is being thoroughly convinced of their truth and certainly. This is why faith is so strong and invincible. It's almost impossible to argue with someone's faith, because they are completely persuaded. How important is this kind of faith? What insights do these verses add?

2 Corinthians 13:5

Philippians 1:27b

Colossians 1:22-23a

1 Timothy 1:19; 4:1; 6:20-21

1 Timothy 3:9

Jude 1:3-4

These verses also show us that *faith implies consistency*. There is a steadfastness and endurance associated with faith that refuses to quit. This kind of faith continues on in spite of opposition and stands fast regardless of trials. It is a faith that refuses to give in, refuses to deny the Lord, refuses to compromise. Only the Holy Spirit can produce this kind of faith in our lives. He gives us a constancy and consistency that enable us to press on and stand firm in the faith.

Just as the other qualities of the fruit of the Spirit have expressions in our actions, so it is with faith or faithfulness. Many people mistakenly believe that if they do what is required of them, they are being faithful. If they tithe their income (give 10% to the church), attend services and don't commit any blatant sins, they are faithful. Read Matthew 25:14-27. Jesus teaches through this parable that being faithful is multiplying what God has given us. It is *doing* something. The wicked servant was unfaithful because he did nothing. He gave back exactly what was given to him. He didn't lose it or steal it, he just did nothing. If all we ever do is what we think we're expected to do to "get by," we're being unfaithful. But the fruit of the Spirit is faithfulness. It is true faith that makes us faithful.

Gentleness

In the King James Version of the Bible, the word translated "gentleness" in the New International Version is rendered "meekness." We sometimes get the impression that a meek person is one who is spineless, submissive or self-deprecating. The Old Testament word for meekness does refer to depression, oppression or condescension, as does the corresponding Greek word in the New Testament. But a different word is used in Galatians 5:23. The definition of this word is: "humility, courtesy, considerateness, meekness." A person who is gentle is considerate, amiable, patient and mild.

Gentleness comes when we have a proper view of ourselves and others. You could say, then, that gentleness stems from humility. According to Romans 12:3, how should we think of ourselves?

Self-appreciation is important, but it should never inflate us to the extent that we feel we are better than anyone else. When we think too highly of ourselves we tend to be insensitive and impatient with the weaknesses of others, which causes us to be harsh and rude instead of gentle. On the other hand, though, if we think too little of ourselves we may be overly critical or brash in an attempt to bring others down to our level so we can feel superior. There must be a balance in the Christian life. Christ died on the cross for our sins

because God placed high value on the worth of a human soul. But at the same time, there was nothing in us that made us deserving of that grace. We are what we are solely because of what Christ has done for us and in us. That thought should humble us.

Once we see ourselves as God sees us, we are able to be gentle with others because we begin to see them as God sees them. It is hard to be rude and offensive to a person we know Christ died for. Read Philippians 2:3-4. How should we treat other people?

What insights do these verses add?

1 Corinthians 4:21

Galatians 6:1

Ephesians 4:2

2 Timothy 2:25

Titus 3:2

1 Peter 3:15

Courtesy, respect and gentleness are the overflow of humility. And humility is only possible as we allow the Holy Spirit to work in our lives.

But having gentleness doesn't mean we skirt issues or sugarcoat exhortations from God's Word so as not to offend anyone. *Gentleness does not imply a lack of strength.* The paradox of gentleness and strength is illustrated in a painting by Norman Rockwell. The scene shows a rugged, brawny farmer with bulging muscles and large, rough hands. But cradled in his palm is a small, frail bird. His gentleness doesn't nullify his strength. In fact, his gentleness actually highlights it.

As Christians, we are to be strong in our zeal for truth and justice; strong in our commitment to what's right; strong in correcting and rebuking because of our love. But this strength must take on the form of gentleness. We don't have to be harsh and abrasive to be strong. It is God's Word and God's wisdom that give us power and strength. *Our* words should be considerate and gentle. According to James 3:13, what is required in order to have the humility to balance power and strength?

This is why gentleness is a fruit of the Spirit — it requires a wisdom that only the Spirit can give.

Gentleness should naturally flow from the heart of a Christian who is walking in step with the Spirit. But we must remember that *gentleness is a choice of life-style.* Each characteristic of the fruit of the Spirit we've studied has had an active side to it. Gentleness in itself is not an action, but it is a description of how we do something, so it can only be evidenced in your life when you are doing something. We can choose whether or not we will be gentle. What commands are given in these verses concerning gentleness?

Ephesians 4:2

Colossians 3:12

1 Timothy 6:11

Notice the imperatives in these verses: be, clothe, pursue. This is something we are commanded to do and are enabled by the Spirit of God to choose to do. "That's just the way I am" is not an adequate excuse for harsh or abrasive speech or actions. If we are to live a life worthy of the calling, if we are God's chosen people, and if we are men and women of God, we must be gentle. A lot of harm has been done to Christianity in the name of truth because of a lack of gentleness. But true gentleness results in a beauty that will draw others to Christ (1 Peter 3:4), who is our greatest example of gentleness (Matthew 11:29). We can't become gentle on our own; it is the fruit of the Spirit in our lives.

Self-Control

The list in Galatians 5:22-23 is very interesting. It begins with love, and so far every characteristic of the fruit of the Spirit we've studied has somehow been connected with love or tempered by love. The list ends with self-control. And every virtue has revealed something we must do, actions we are responsible for carrying out. Paul concludes with self-control as if to say, "And of course, all these require self-control (which is also the fruit of the Spirit)." In actuality, then, we've been learning about self-control all along. There are no interesting nuances of meaning in this word translated "self-control" — it means exactly what it says. It means *I* am in control; I am able to *decide* what my body does and does not do.

In order to understand self-control we must go back to the very beginning — to the book of Genesis. God made men and women with a free will, with the ability to choose to either obey or disobey. He also gave to us natural desires such as appetite, the desire for sex, pleasure, leisure or recreation, and the desire to be in control. All of these were deemed by God to be good. He gave to Adam and Eve food from the garden, He commanded them to multiply, He provided for them a day of rest and He gave them the responsibility of being in control over all that He had made — all within the first few chapters of Genesis. But, after the fall, God revealed to them (to Cain, specifically) the need for self-control. What did God say about sin in Genesis 4:7?

Sin, or Satan, desires to control us. Satan's ploy is to take God-given desires and exploit them — by making the fulfillment of the desire the goal. Each of the natural desires God gave mankind was designed to benefit men and women as they worked and served the Lord and to bring glory to God. Appetite was given for sustenance; sex, for procreation and intimacy; leisure, for bodily rest and renewal; and the desire for control, to provide order and security. None of these is the goal itself. But Satan makes us think the desire is the goal, and so we live to eat instead of eat to live. Sexual pleasure becomes a goal so that

fidelity in marriage is no longer a consideration. Adultery and promiscuity are acceptable because they are means to the goal of sexual gratification. When leisure or pleasure become the goal we tend to live for fun instead of the satisfaction of hard work. This is why workers want more pay for less labor; why families save, then splurge on lavish vacations; why we watch television to excess and why laziness has become the norm. When the desire for control becomes the goal, spouses are battered, laws are broken and wars are fought. Satan's temptation in the garden was a temptation of control. He told Adam and Eve they could become like God and have control and power over their world.

But Genesis 4:7 says we must become masters over sin. We must exercise self-control or self-discipline. Even though God gives us a free will, how free are we when we allow ourselves to practice sin?

Romans 6:16

Romans 6:20

When we give our lives to Christ and become born again, we give our will over to God and become His slaves. We still have a free will, but we commit ourselves to following His will. What do you learn from these verses?

Matthew 26:39

Philippians 2:13

1 Peter 4:2

Romans 6:13-14

*Self-control is a discipline **we** must decide to exercise.* Self-control as a fruit of the Spirit doesn't mean we have the right (or even the ability) to run our own lives, but it does mean we have the ability to make a conscious decision to follow the will of God.

Self-control is for our own benefit and the benefit of others.

Write out 1 Corinthians 10:23-24.

The Corinthian Christians were relishing their newly found freedom in the Lord, boasting that everything was permissible for them. But Paul wrote to tell them that they needed to exercise self-control. While everything was permissible, not everything was beneficial. For us today it may be permissible to eat nothing but candy and potato chips, but it is certainly not beneficial. We need to have self-control. It is probably permissible to watch television, but not all of the programming is beneficial for your spiritual and emotional well-being.

Paul goes on to say that self-control is also for the benefit of others. We control our tempers, tongues and actions towards others for their good. We set a good example so as not to be a stumbling block to others. We need to examine our activities to make sure they're not only beneficial, but also constructive and for the good of others around us.

Self-control is not allowing yourself to be mastered by anything. God told Cain that sin desired to control him, but that he must not let it master him. Paul also said he would not be mastered by anything. When something has control over us, we are not using self-control and it is sin. That goes for food, fear, alcohol, cigarettes, credit cards, gambling, tempers and appetites. We are to be in complete control of our bodies, not mastered by anything. Write out 1 Corinthians 6:12.

Self-control requires hard work and discipline. Read 1 Corinthians 9:24-27. We must “beat” our bodies and make them our slaves; that is, we must deny ourselves from time to time to make sure we’re not controlled by our desires. Just as the athlete must have self-discipline in order to run the race, so must we. And the prize for us is an eternal one. Self-control is not an option — it is essential in order to receive the prize we’re running for. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness and gentleness — all these require a measure of self-control.

When others see that we are in control of our lives, that we are not mastered by emotions, by the actions of others, by sinful habits, etc., they will know we have something different. They are slaves to sin; we are “free indeed” (John 8:32, 34-36). When we exercise self-control, God is glorified, for only then can we freely do God’s will — and others will be won to Him. “Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit” (Galatians 5:24-25).