



Titus 1:4-9
Believe
Self-Control

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Palm Sunday

As we continue in our sermon series titled, “Believe” and address this question of “Who am I becoming?” we look today at a topic that is not naturally high up on most people’s list of the qualities they desire to have in their life: and that is, “Self-control.” It just isn’t one that comes naturally to an awful lot of people, and isn’t one that some even have a lot of desire to pursue. When you look at the list of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 3:22-23 – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control – self-control is clearly the underdog, probably followed by “patience.” Perhaps that’s why Paul lists it last – so we don’t overlook it and forget about it! And today’s Scripture reading comes from one of Paul’s letters that is also kind of an underdog: Titus. It’s an often-overlooked book of the Bible. **So today we’re looking at an underdog character trait in an underdog letter with the belief that with God’s Spirit powering us through faith in Jesus we will live like a top dog for God and His Kingdom.**

Now, before we dive into this topic, let’s talk about Titus for just a moment, because probably most of us don’t know a lot about Titus – and for good reason. Titus is the name of one of Paul’s ministry partners, and he is only mentioned a few times in Paul’s letters, and never in the gospels and never in the Book of Acts - which is like a biography of the birth of the Church. But Titus played a huge role in the shape of the church for the last 2,000 years, when he became one of Paul’s partners in taking the Gospel message beyond the walls of Judaism, to the Gentiles. They helped carry out the message of salvation by grace alone through faith in Jesus – that a person didn’t need to first become Jewish and go through certain Jewish rituals and *then* become a Christ-follower. You can read about that in Galatians. Titus is named in other of Paul’s letters as well, and was one of Paul’s two most-trusted ministry partners, on par with Timothy, who is better-known to us today. The letter that bears Titus’ name happens to be short in length, and therefore is the primary reason it is an underdog of the New Testament. But Titus himself was no underdog, and it is safe to say that in large part because of him, non-Jewish Jesus followers even exist. With that bit of background, let’s dive in.

As I said a moment ago, self-control is a bit of an underdog. And: **It's ironic that "self-control" is an underdog character trait and fruit of the Spirit, because self-control is one of the keys to "success."** And so you'd think that would inspire us to live with more self-control. And I'm not going to say it's easy for anyone or that I am a perfect model of self-control, either. Just this last week, Gwen and I needed to buy lunch while out on the road, and instead of getting something healthy at Subway we went to Dairy Queen. And my meal came with a small sundae, but I upgraded it to a medium-sized "Oreo and cookie dough" Blizzard for only a \$1.50 more. I'll do that every day of the week and twice on Sunday! So, no self-control there, that's for sure! But at least I didn't upgrade to the *large* Blizzard like Gwen did. Clearly, she had less self-control in that moment than I did. So that made me feel good, and like I'd exercised some measure of self-control. ☺

Another brief example: Just last night we had a rare treat at home: ice cream (it was a weird week for us – lots of ice cream!). And I was helping myself to seconds, my daughter Hailey asked me, "What's tomorrow's sermon on, dad?" She knew exactly what it was on. I told her I would be exercising a high degree of self-control by not having thirds.

Snarky comments from kids aside: self-control *is* something we can live into, and God wants to build it into our lives. We see it in today's passage where Paul writes about some of the qualities to look for in elders to lead the church. And one of the qualities listed in verse 8 is "self-discipline" or "self-control." Later in Titus 2:11-12 we get more about this. Paul writes, **"For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It [the grace of God] teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives..."** (Titus 2:11-12).

So the first thing to understand about self-control here is that it really isn't something that comes from ourselves. It's really mis-named. It is something that comes to us by the grace of God. Self-control has its roots in faith in God. This morning's statement of faith from the "Believe" book puts it well: **"I have the power through Christ to control myself."** This centrality of

Jesus Christ is the key to it. About 20 weeks ago in the series, we had a sermon on finding our identity in Jesus Christ. Our identity is not in the labels that others put on us, or that we put on us...our identity is not in our stuff or even our accomplishments. Our identity is in Jesus Christ through faith in Him, and it can be best summarized that you and I are children of our Heavenly Father. That's our identity. And when we have that identity as a child of God through faith in Jesus Christ, God gives us the power, and the tools (not power tools) needed to live as He calls us to, including to live with self-control.

If we want to narrow it down further still, we would say that for the Christian, it really is "Holy Spirit-control:" **It's the Holy Spirit moving in our lives, giving us the power to live with self-control.** And the Holy Spirit, which is the third expression of God along with the Father and Jesus the Son...the Holy Spirit dwells in us, giving us that power, when we live by faith in Jesus Christ. So the key to self-control is not to first turn in-ward, but to first turn up-ward.¹ It starts by turning upward, and then letting God work on our insides. And the awesome thing is that then God gets the glory and the praise when we live with the self-control that He gives us!

And: **The first place God works is our minds.** Paul writes in Romans about being transformed by the renewing of our minds: that our minds, not our hearts, are the place where transformation takes root. And it's not enough to just intellectually know the right thing to do, or the right thing to think when it comes to self control. Just knowing the "right answer" isn't enough. We have to be convinced and convicted by the Spirit about it.

God gives us self-control when we have the conviction that we need to do the right thing when we have a choice before us. We can *know* what the right choice is, but in order to actually *make* that right decision, we have to be *convinced* about its rightness. We need the Spirit of God to convince us and transform our thinking about right principles and convictions.

If we aren't sure about this, we can probably each remember decisions we've made in life where our brain was left out, and we only let our heart guide us. Those decisions are impulsive. They aren't thought through. We may have

known what the right thing to do was, the thing that took some self-control...but we let our hearts lead without the input from the brain. The best example I can think of from my own life actually comes from Gwen, when she said “I do.” Clearly, her brain was not engaged. The Bible speaks to this deception of the heart in a few different places. For instance, Jeremiah 17:9 says, “The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick; Who can understand it?”

Jesus says in Matthew 15, **“But the things that come out of a person’s mouth come from the heart, and these defile them. For out of the heart come evil thoughts—murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander” (Matthew 15:18-19).**

So we need a renewed mind to govern our heart, to steer it’s passions and desires in the right direction, so that we live with self-control. And that’s what the Holy Spirit does as the Spirit works in our lives through Scripture, through other people in our lives, and even directly as the Spirit nudges us and leads us. This is a really timely reminder, because next Sunday all of us, especially us parents, will be faced with a self-control decision to make in regards to Easter Candy. Do we eat our kids’ Easter candy when they aren’t looking, or not? If the Spirit hasn’t convinced our minds before next Sunday about what the right decision is, then we will probably lack self-control when our hearts seek to lead. That’s why I’m going into next weekend mentally aware and convinced that the decision that will take self-control, is to make sure my kids don’t get cavities: so I’m going to eat their candy. 😊 I just think that’s my God-given parental duty to raise my kids well! 😊 So the Holy Spirit has a huge impact on our self-control when we turn upward to Jesus, and then His Spirit dwells in us and transforms our thinking.

A second facet of self-control is keeping the big picture in view. This is where our faith in God can really impact us and inspire us to live with self-control, because who better keeps in view the big picture, and who has a more complete big picture, than God? He’s got the big picture of all creation because He put it there; He’s got the big picture of the spiritual dimension because our Heavenly Father *is* Spirit and the spiritual dimension is where He “lives;” and He’s got the big picture of time because He is the Alpha and

Omega, the Beginning and the End. And when we turn upward to our heavenly Father, He reminds us of the bigger picture, of His plans, including the good plans that He has for us.

We see it in the life of Jesus, too. **Jesus keeps the big picture in view throughout his ministry – in his teachings, the miracles, his interactions with people, the parables, and more.** Everything he does is in light of eternity, in constant communication with His Heavenly Father, and is for the benefit of anyone who will put their faith in Him. He doesn't let his view get narrowed down to himself: He always remembers His Heavenly Father's perspective, and that he came for the benefit of others. That's the big picture he has in mind even as he comes into Jerusalem on the donkey. And that big-picture view keeps him focused and on track, disciplined...living with self-control.

And when *we* keep the big picture in view and are convinced of its priority, that big picture can govern the decisions we make. For instance, no Mariners fan is making plans for the playoffs or the World Series this fall after the first couple weeks or so of the MLB season because of the big picture: there's still nearly 150 games to play this season, and their track record the last 17 years or so isn't very good, or even for the entire history of the organization! More seriously, when the big picture is that you need to get out of debt because of a previous lack of self-control in spending, you can let that big-picture goal govern your decisions about how you spend money; When the big picture is that you need to stay sober so you can keep your job and maintain relationships, then that can inspire you to live with self-control in regards to what you put in your body; When the big picture is to graduate from High School or college, that big picture can serve as the motivator for making the right decisions about homework and studying. So keep the big picture in view.

One final thought and then we'll wrap this up. Proverbs 25:28 says, **“A person who lacks self-control is like a city whose walls are broken” (Proverbs 25:28).** In their day, the wall around a city was it's number one defense mechanism against outside forces that would seek to tear it down. And when we lack self-control...when we don't live by faith and turn

upward so that the Spirit would work inside us to convince us of what is right, and when we don't let the big picture govern our decisions...we will lack self-control and be like a city without its primary defense mechanism. And that can lead to a life of pain, brokenness, and heartache. Some of us here this morning have experienced that. Some of us this morning could bear witness to the pain of a life without Holy Spirit-fueled self-control. Fortunately, our God is a God of healing and restoration, and He can mend that brokenness and give us a do-over at life lived with Him.

So whether your whole life was or is out of control, or a certain part of your life needs a greater sense of control, you're not on your own. You're not alone in this. Turn upward. Turn to Jesus, say "yes" to him, and He will work in your life in powerful ways through His Spirit; and we can model our lives after Jesus' and keep the big picture in view and allow that to govern our lives and the decisions we make. I pray you would experience more of the Spirit's power in your life in this way. And as we live into this Spirit-led self-control, I also pray that we would give God all the glory and all the honor, just as happened on that first Palm Sunday as Jesus rode in to Jerusalem, because truly it's all because of His work in us.

Whether you have a high degree of Spirit-powered self-control or you have almost none of it, let's affirm our belief in where it comes from, and commit to living by the power of Christ in us: **"I have the power through Christ to control myself."** Let's pray...Amen.

ⁱ Thanks to an article by John Piper for this phraseology. <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/self-control-and-the-power-of-christ>