

of what already is! The *spirit* transcends ‘me-ism’ and invites us into the richness of the present moment!

## Tuesday

The last fruit of the spiritual tree is *self-control*. What is self-control? Merriam Webster dictionary shares this simple definition—“Restraint exercised over one’s own impulses, emotions, or desires.” This concept isn’t foreign to us, as it is taught to us as children, and we spend a lifetime continuing to practice it. Our modern world may not use the terminology of self-control; instead, we often speak of *boundaries*. Boundaries are these invisible lines that we create, of what we won’t cross. Boundaries help us clarify what we will or will not do; the limits of our willingness; and the moral compass that guides us.

To be sure, no one is perfect in exercising self-control! Take for example the Stanford Marshmallow Experiment. They placed a single marshmallow in front of four-year olds, with the explicit instructions that they could eat that one or they could wait fifteen minutes and receive two marshmallows. Clearly, this was a huge exercise in self-control for a kid!! 70% of the kids ate the first marshmallow whereas only 30% exercised patience and self-control in order to gain an extra one! As they followed these four-year olds through their lives, the 30% tested much higher on their SAT exams and were overall more successful than the 70%.

Why? Perhaps it is the gift of self-control to be discerning about decisions; willing to slow down enough for the gratification by making a great decision; and a willingness to look beyond the immediacy of the now and into the future. Or, as Paul said, his focus is on the whole race of life, not just a moment. In Philippians 3:14-16 he says, “*The goal I pursue is the prize of God’s upward call in Christ*

*Jesus. So, all of us who are spiritually mature should think this way and if anyone thinks differently, God will reveal it to him or her. Only let’s live in a way that is consistent with whatever level we have reached.”* Yes, as these fruit are produced in us, we have an abiding sense of this upward call toward maturity and fullness of life!

## Wednesday

All of us have a weakness (or more if we are honest!). One of mine is brownies! I don’t know why, but a brownie has an amazing power over my brain and though I may say ‘Eat just one’ my body screams ‘eat as many as you want!’ While this is a bit of a silly example, the point is that at times we stand before something that tests our boundaries and self-control. I find that these experiences are always something that we would want! The gift of self-control is realized in our longings and desires. That is the only time we are forced into exercising this fruit!

What do we do when we are faced with the struggle and/or challenge of self-control? Certainly there are times that we give in, but grace, being grace, means we will have another chance to grow yet again! Too often we focus on the negative, rather than accentuating the positive. We are prone to dwell on the failings, far more than the successes. Why? Perhaps it is due to our realization of our limitations. We then start hearing tapes in our heads of ‘be stronger,’ ‘be smarter,’ ‘be braver,’ etc.

Paul grants us a way to look at these moments with fresh eyes. In describing his ‘thorn in the flesh’ (a weakness that he just can’t overcome with pure will-power), he states, (Jesus speaking) “*My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness. So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me.*

*Therefore I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong.”* There is a profound power of letting go and trusting in God. The portal to this is the ancient cry of all humanity—HELP! God doesn’t force God’s self on us but waits for our willingness to ask for help. In light of this, how might God help you in the midst of self-control? What is it that you are struggling with and have tried with your own might, that you need to say that simple prayer—‘HELP!’ God is our strength and our refuge...may you trust that!

## Thursday

These fruit are produced in you, in order to bless others. They are the outgrowth of your faithful living. You certainly benefit as well, but the end purpose is to share it. Think for a moment of self-control—how does this gift impact those around you? Spouse? Neighbors? Co-workers? Friends? Strangers? An overly simplistic example is that, my self-control ensures that I drive the speed limit down H-1 rather than testing to see whether my speedometer could actually hit 140 MPH! If I tested that theory, certainly I would not only put my life in grave peril but also every driver and passenger around me!

You see, self-control not only helps you find the deeper places of abundance, they also enable others to experience these places. I think of Job. While life is falling apart, and everyone around him expect him to deny God, he remains self-controlled. Through his example, others were, and have been, inspired. He grants us the example of, living in that place of knowing his boundaries and, remaining true to himself. In contrast, you have the story of King David seeing Bathsheba and relinquishing his self-control and diving into the lust of the

moment. The ripple of his one decision cascades through his life!

Often, we need examples to show us the way. We often call them teachers and mentors. None of us do life perfectly, but we hope that we learn, mature and share the deeper lessons. Perhaps that is an aspect of these fruit—by sharing, they become planted in another, in order to grow and sprout more. That is the way of faith—receiving and giving; giving and receiving!

## Friday

On Sunday we will begin a new sermon series called “God of the Underdogs.” Who doesn’t love a good underdog story?! These underdogs reveal how God is at work in ways we often overlook and works on behalf of those on the margins, the oppressed and the persecuted. Tomorrow we will look at the story of Joseph, as found in the last part of the book of Genesis. His story is a profound narrative of exercising self-control, even when life wasn’t fair! His faith guided him and, in the end, all his experiences became the fruit that nourished a whole civilization to well-being!

Today, I’d like to invite you read a portion of his narrative. Read Genesis 39. How does Joseph exercise self-control? How does this fruit end up blessing others? I can’t imagine Joseph enjoyed this experience, and yet, God was with him and made him fruitful by blessing those around him. The rest of the story of Joseph is one marked by his patient, humble walk with God in which he continually exercises self-control in order to be true to himself and his God. May his story inspire your story!

## Saturday

When we produce the fruit of the flesh, we benefit often at the cost of another. When we

produce Fruit of the Spirit, the whole world benefits including one’s self. It is the way of faith—the continual call to leave the ‘me-istic’ way of selfishness, in order to discover the vastness of wonder, blessings, and joy, in impacting others with God’s goodness.

For the last eight weeks, you have journeyed through these fruit, in the belief that if you spent time with them you might begin seeing a truer form of yourself and your purpose. You are created for good...to be a partner with God...and to help cultivate the environment for God’s kingdom, to be revealed on earth as it is in heaven.

One of the passages that people tell me is their favorite is Jeremiah 29:11. It says, “*For I know the plans I have for you,*’ declares the LORD, *‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.’*” While we most often hear this in a singular promise, this passage is God’s statement to the people. It is an ‘us’ statement! Therefore, this passage has hope for ‘me’ and for ‘us!’ Read the larger context and revel in the hope we have, that God is at work within us and is with us even now!

*“For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the LORD, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future. Then you will call on me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you. You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you,’ declares the LORD...”*

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# A Fruitful Life – Part 8: Self-Control

Devotional for the week of August 28, 2017

## Monday

Today, we conclude our eight-week exploration of the Fruit of the Spirit. To contextualize these eight weeks, I’d like you to read once more Paul’s words about the fruit of our living. He uses the gift of contrast to show, a life lived out of one’s own desires and, one lived out of the Spirit. Another way of looking at these lists is: the falsities that we think will bring us an abundant life, versus the true fruit of abundance.

Read Galatians 5:13-26. After spending the past seven weeks studying the fruit, how do you view this passage? Does it make more sense? Paul continually uses the imagery of *flesh* to describe the negative. He wasn’t referring to skin or physicality; instead, he is speaking of the motivating center of our action and responses. The *flesh* is firmly rooted in ‘me-ism’ in which the focus is gratification. Yet, the cost to this gratification is often at the expense of others. It is living in the flesh that we live into the lesser qualities that make us human!

When Paul speaks against ‘living in the flesh’ for we won’t inherit the Kingdom of God, was he speaking of heaven? So often, that is where our minds wander. I don’t think that is the case. Jesus enacts the Kingdom of God here and since most of the list of the *flesh* and the *spirit* deal with our experience now. Is Paul suggesting that to experience, to taste, to see the Kingdom of God, we must dwell in the spiritual realm? It would seem that the *flesh* functions as blinders to the beauty and wonder

