

WORSHIP

Sermon | 8.5.2018



Fruits of the Spirit: Self-Control

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Galatians 5

Matthew 4:1-11

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished.

The tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.'

But he answered,

'It is written,

"One does not live by bread alone,

but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." '

Then the devil took him to the holy city and placed him on the pinnacle

of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down; for it is written,

"He will command his angels concerning you",

and "On their hands they will bear you up,

so that you will not dash your foot against a stone." '

Jesus said to him, 'Again it is written, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." '

Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, 'All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.'

Jesus said to him, 'Away with you, Satan! for it is written,

"Worship the Lord your God,

and serve only him." '

Then the devil left him, and suddenly angels came and waited on him.



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For the past few weeks in worship we've been pairing up one of Paul's "fruits of the spirit" with a story from the Scripture that illustrates what that fruit looks like when it is lived. Paul lists these fruits of the spirit to describe what it looks like when our lives evidence God's grace in Jesus Christ. Today our fruit is self-control. Our Scripture is from the gospel of Matthew. This is the story of Jesus' temptation – which takes place immediately after he baptized in the Jordan River. Listen with me for the word of the Lord.

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When the gospel of Matthew was written, neither the author nor the community that heard this good news knew much about the science of self-control.

Now, we do.

Neuroscientists tell us that our ability (or inability) to exercise self-control is a function of a part of our brain called the pre-frontal cortex. Specifically, the back of our pre-frontal cortex. Unfortunately, according to one neurologist I read this week, "the problem with relying on the pre-frontal cortex for our self-control is that the pre-frontal cortex is a relatively feeble bit of our brain." That's a direct quote, by the way. The majority, and less feeble parts, of our brain compete with the pre-frontal cortex when it comes to decisions and impulses – and that doesn't always translate into good choices.

In a famous experiment, Stanford University psychologist Walter Mischel tested the not-yet-fully-developed pre-frontal cortexes of a group of children between the ages of four and six. The experiment was to put each child in a room by themselves with one marshmallow. Each child was told that they could eat the marshmallow, but if they waited 15 minutes without eating the marshmallow, they would get another one.

Mischel first conducted this experiment in 1960. Thankfully, psychologists have repeated the test in more recent years, and earlier this year (thanks to the advance of technology) those 15 minutes of a child attempting to practice self-control are available for your viewing pleasure on YouTube. If you want a laugh after church, I suggest you look it up.

About the time the researcher leaves the room so it's just child vs. marshmallow, you can see that pre-frontal cortex whirring.

Some of the kids pick up the marshmallow and poke it.

Others kiss it.

Others hug it like a teddy bear.

Others try sitting on their hands while they stare, longingly.



Others slowly bang their head against the table.

One little girl eats half the marshmallow before the researcher manages to leave the room and start the timer!

One of the reasons scientists are so interested in understanding how we practice self-control is because there are certifiable economic benefits from our ability to do so.

That economic benefit goes two ways. On one side is the individual: there is a strong correlation between self-control and SAT scores, college graduation rates, and average household income.

The other side of the coin is that there is huge economic benefit in industries that attempt to help people practice self-control.

Look no further than the weight loss industry. Last year in the United States we spent 66 billion dollars to shed and keep off unwanted pounds. That's the equivalent to the Gross Domestic Product of Afghanistan.

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The Apostle Paul and the writer of Matthew's gospel might not have known the first thing about the science and the economics of self-control, but their interest goes much deeper than test scores or making or saving a buck.

Many of us tend to put self-control in the self-help category – as a strategy that helps us achieve things, to improve our outcomes, helps us be more productive and successful. That may well be true, but in a theological and biblical sense, self-control is about living in the frame that God intends for us. It is about being authentic – fully ourselves – fully human – not more, and not less than God created us to be.

The Bible talks a lot about self-control.

That's what is at stake in those first chapters of Genesis.

“You may eat of any tree of the garden, but of the tree with the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat or you will die.”

“You will not die,” said the serpent, “but you will be like God.”

So then they saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, and they took of its fruit...and they didn't even wait 15 minutes...they just ate.

Self-control – it's about being fully human...not more, and not less than God created us to be.



Matthew's story about the temptation happens while Jesus is still dripping wet from his baptism; with his ears still ringing from the sound of God's voice from the heavens that confirmed for Jesus who he really was: "This is my son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased."

Matthew tells us the story this way on purpose – because temptation – and self-control in the face of temptation – is really about identity...about being clear about who we are – and who we are not.

The Spirit leads Jesus into the wilderness – and after 40 days and nights of fasting, when he was hungry and vulnerable – the devil came.

Now, I don't know what you think about the devil –

whether you think – like Milton depicted– that the devil is a physical being,
or whether you think the devil is a force that opposes God's will.

That's another sermon for another Sunday.

But whatever you think or believe, when used in *this* passage, what the word "devil" means is one who splits people off from God. That is the devil's purpose in this story: in three different ways, to try to exploit Jesus' situation by sowing the seeds doubt that would cause him to behave in ways that were counter to God's design.

The devil pulls the lever of doubt three times:

If you are the Son of God...command these stones to become bread

If you are the Son of God...throw yourself down to prove it

I, not God, control the kingdoms of this world...and I can give you

all of them if you but bow down and worship me.

Jesus has already been identified as the Son of God – that is the voice ringing in his ears. He has no need to test or prove that claim – by turning stones into bread, or flinging himself off the temple and into the arms of the angels. But it's one thing to believe in God's promises at a baptism. It is a lot harder to trust those promises in the wilderness of life.

Jesus knows, intellectually, that the kingdoms of this world are temporary, and the Kingdom of God will reign forever. But the fact is, Jesus was getting ready to start his ministry in the real world – where earthly kings and kingdoms had real power, and the real ability to convict and crucify those who threatened that power.

Again, the focus of this story is about identity.

"If you are the son of God..."

If...



In all his attempts, the devil's key argument – the main temptation – is to take away the ambiguity.

It is as if the devil said: "Wouldn't it be better to know for certain? Just turn the stone to bread, jump from the temple, worship me...and you will never know doubt again. Do that, and you will know. You will be sufficient on your own."

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I joked with someone who asked me about what I was preaching this week – and I told them the point of the sermon was that Jesus practiced self-control in the face of temptation so why don't you just be more like Jesus? Easy, right?

The truth is, it is not accident that the ultimate test of Jesus' self-control was whether he could resist the urge to know for certain. I actually take comfort in fact that the devil thought that Jesus – fully human, and fully God – might be susceptible to that temptation. Because I know that I am.

And I know that more than whether I cut carbs, or work out enough, or avoid the impulse buy, or spend enough time in study and prayer – deep down what really challenges me to practice self-control is when I'm not certain.

It's when I have doubts.

It's when I begin to question my role and my place and whether I am enough.

When I realize that – at some level – I am insufficient.

The 17th century mathematician and theologian Blaise Pascal called it our "God shaped hole." That awareness that no matter our station is in life – our age, our education, our socio-economic status, our success – each of us is still in need of something. That there is a space in us that is not filled.

You've been there, right?

That feeling that there is always more you can be?

That there is always something more you can do?

Always someone else you can please?

That there are always better grades you can make?

That there is always more money that you can earn?

That there is always more that you can achieve?



It is a place of wilderness.

And the temptation is to over-reach.

It's to listen to the voices around us that promise they have the answer to what we need.

That they can offer the solution.

They can erase the doubt.

They can provide the certainty.

And there are so many voices that promise those things.

So many.

The temptation for us is to fill up that God-shaped hole with marshmallows.

That is the urge we have to control.

Our challenge is to recognize that –

because we are human –

there will always be a part of us that is not in control.

And that that space, that hunger that we have, exists to remind us that we are not self-sufficient – but that we are wholly dependent on the grace and mercy of the God who filled the gap between who we could be – and who we are – with himself.

Remembering that isn't always easy.

But it is best news.

Amen.

