

Growing in Self-Control

One thing you should know about me is that I really **love dairy**. Like a lot. The first time I tried ice cream as a kid, I legitimately felt like I had stumbled upon the eighth world wonder. And even today, there are few things better than getting our kids to bed, and sitting down with a bowl of Mayfield Strawberry ice cream that is entirely too large for any human to eat. But I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. I love *milk*. I love *cheese*. And I'm a good Tennessean, which means I prefer most of my food coated with a thin layer of melted butter. And we're in a series about *fasting*, so it's probably not helpful for me to go on. But I think you get my point: I *love dairy*.

But there is also a *problem*: I am also **allergic** to dairy. Like *bigly* allergic. Like sometimes I'll have a salad just *sprinkled* with shredded cheese on the top, and I will be out of commission for a day or two. My stomach simply does not feel at all the same way about dairy that *I* do. **There's actually a story that my wife and some of our staff will delight to tell you about a night when we had all gone out for dessert at Cheesecake Factory. The next day, while feeling the effects from what I ate the night before, I texted out "does anybody else feel like they got food poisoning?" My wife responded with "it was probably the dairy you had last night." And then I said, true story: "wait. Cheesecake has dairy in it?!" To which my wife said, "how would you pronounce the first six letters of the word CHEESE-cake?" Not my most intelligent moment.**

But here's the thing about all of this. **For quite a few years of my life, I didn't know the problems I experienced were dairy-related.** It wasn't until about a year into being married that my wife asked me "do you think you're allergic to dairy?" And I said "noooo. There's no way. I *like* dairy too much to be allergic to it." To which she patiently informed me that that's not how food allergies work. *And* as it turns out, that was *precisely* the culprit of so many issues I was having—I just hadn't made the connection yet.

Now, here's **why I took that very deep dive** into the details of my dietary life with you this morning (arguably *too* deep, but there's nothing we can do about it now). It's because I wonder if some of us have a *similar* thing going on when it comes to aspects of our relationship with Jesus. I wonder if behind many of the problems and issues we experience on a regular basis, there is actually a common culprit to blame. I wonder if there is an undiagnosed problem behind all the *other* problems, that we haven't fully identified yet. ~~And therefore, don't know how to address.~~

I've **been pastoring people** for just over a decade now. And in that time, I've met with a *lot* of people experiencing a *lot* of different issues. But I don't think I'm exaggerating

when I say that **at least half of the difficulties I've seen people face are either caused by, or contributed to, by a lack of self-control.** I've seen people create **financial problems** for themselves, because they couldn't say no to buying things they don't need. I've seen people **neglect their friends,** family and children because they couldn't stay off of their **phones.**

I've seen people create **interpersonal drama** with friends or family members because they couldn't say no to gossiping about those people. I've seen people **create tension at work** because they couldn't stop themselves from venting about co-workers, or telling off their boss. I've seen people create **health issues** for themselves because they couldn't say no to overeating. I've seen people **shipwreck their marriages** because they couldn't say no to a flirtatious relationship with a coworker or neighbor. I've seen people **create addictions** because they couldn't say no to porn or sex or alcohol or something else.

And really, I **could go on** with examples. But **I have seen people experience problem after problem after problem, that was caused—at least in part—by a lack of self-control.** As it turns out, when you can't say no to certain behaviors, it wreaks a lot of havoc in your life as a whole. In fact, here's how **Proverbs 25:28** puts it. I think this is a really helpful image:

Like a city whose walls are broken through is a person without self-control.

So **think about this imagery with me.** In the ancient world, there were a lot of dangers and threats to a city. Your city could be attacked in the middle of the night; it could be ransacked, raided, conquered even. That could happen at almost any time. Which explains why *most* cities back in the day would spend a lot of time and a lot of money constructing large *walls* to *protect* their city from things like that happening. But the author of Proverbs says that a person *without self-control* is like a city whose walls are “broken through.” Like a city whose walls don't do their job.

Here's what I think he's saying. **Not having self-control is failing to do something about the one thing in life that you could have control over.** In life, there are *lots* of things you *can't* control, amen? So much you can't control. Things happen. People can hurt you. You can get sick. You can lose your job. The economy can take a hit (not that we know anything about *that* lately). *So many things* can happen in life that negatively affect you, that you have absolutely *zero* control over. *But* the **one thing you can control** (at least theoretically) is *yourself*. So **when you choose to live without self-control, it's like you've taken the one thing that could be an asset in your life, and you've made it an additional enemy.** Now, not only is the *world* making life harder for you; *you're also* making life harder for you. You're like a city without any walls.

But, if you're a follower of Jesus, here's the thing: you can learn self-control, with the help of the Holy Spirit. Turn with me, if you haven't already, to the passage we heard read a moment ago, in **Galatians 5**. The Scriptures teach us that followers of Jesus can take a very *different* approach to life, and to our desires. We can learn a mindset that acts as an *asset* to our life, and not an *enemy*. For what that looks like, read with me in Galatians 5. We'll pick it up in v. 16. Paul writing, says:

So I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the flesh desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. The acts of the flesh are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies (there's a word I bet you didn't know you would hear this morning), and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God. But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and (notice this one especially) self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.

So for Paul (the author of Galatians), following Jesus is about many things. But based on this passage, **it is at least about** what he calls "walking by the Spirit." Evidently, there are two options before us: walking by the *flesh*, and walking by the Spirit. **Walking by the flesh, he says, is essentially doing whatever your most base instincts tell you to do.** Which ends up looking like a whole *host* of things. Some **things that** probably sound stronger and **more intense** to us: *sexual immorality, impurity, debauchery, drunkenness, idolatry, witchcraft...orgies* get thrown in there just for good measure, *hatred...all of those fairly intense things* are evidence to Paul that someone is "gratifying the desires of the flesh."

And at the same time, *some* of the examples of "walking by the flesh" are also probably things we would view as **pretty mild by comparison**. He mentions *discord* (just general disagreeableness with other people), *jealousy* (simply wanting the life that someone else has), *selfish ambition* (just caring about *your* hopes and dreams in a way that disregards the needs of those around you), *dissensions, factions* (basically, cliquishness), *envy...* All of *those things* probably sound much less intense than the others. **But according to Paul, those things are just as much evidence that someone is "walking by the**

flesh” as the others. And, just as an aside: one thing I love about our church is that we have people who God saved out of the more “extreme” things on the list, people who God saved out of the “milder” things on this list, and people that God saved out of some of both. And yet, every single one of us is invited into God’s family through a sheer act of grace.

But once that happens, Paul says, we have **a choice to make**: will we “gratify the desires of the *flesh*”? Or will we “walk by the Spirit”? Will we do what *we*, on our own, *sinfully want* to do? Or will we fight to do what *God* wants us to do? Specifically, will we always say “yes” to ourselves and our desires, or will we learn by the Spirit to sometimes tell ourselves “no”? Will we be ruled by *self*? Or will we *learn self-control*?

In the language of Proverbs, will we operate like a “city without walls” and reap the often devastating consequences? Or will we take hold of the one thing we *can* control, and reap the benefits? I don’t know about y’all, but I’ve learned one too many times in my life that being a city without walls is no way to go: it pretty much always leads to shame or frustration or regret, at least eventually. So I’d love to learn how to walk by the Spirit instead. And I wonder if we learned to walk by the Spirit, if it wouldn’t solve (or at least improve) a lot of other issues in our life as well.

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So, **assuming that** you’re a follower of Jesus and you’re *with me* in desiring that type of life...the natural next question becomes *how? How do we learn to do something as abstract as “walking by the Spirit,” and “not gratifying the desires of the flesh?” How do we get there? Well here’s at least one answer to that question. You ready for it? **Fasting**.* I know some of you were beginning to wonder how any of this even connected to our series—and there it is. **I think one very practical, tangible way we can learn to walk by the Spirit and not gratify the desires of our flesh is by practicing fasting.** Last week, we talked about how the *primary* motivation for fasting is to become more like Jesus. Which is absolutely true. But I think one *specific* way it helps us become more like Jesus is by *growing* us in self-control.

And I want to spend our time together this morning talking about **two ways** that I think it does that. First, fasting helps us learn self-control through what we might call...

Exposure

Here’s **what I mean**: fasting can *reveal* sinful tendencies in our lives that we might otherwise *overlook*. It brings those things to the surface where we can more readily identify them. **Richard Foster**, who I think has written one of the best books on spiritual formation out there, says it like this:

*Fasting reveals the things that control us [...] We (often) cover up what is inside us with food and other good things, but in fasting these things surface. If pride controls us, it will be revealed almost immediately [...] Anger, bitterness, jealousy, strife, fear—if they are within us, they will surface during fasting.*¹

Fasting has this ability to expose some of the things that otherwise can remain hidden in the recesses of our heart. When we fast, those things often bubble up. What's funny is that we actually already have a category for this in our society: it's called being hungry. Right? When we get hungry—and especially when we get really hungry—it often exposes the worst parts of us. We become impatient, quick-tempered, biting, unloving—all of these ugly aspects of our hearts get exposed, because the hunger makes us uncomfortable and reveals them. And I think hunger can reveal even more things than that.

You see, whether we realize it or not—admit it or not—a lot of us often run to food for comfort. In fact, here in the South, we're almost encouraged to do it. We literally use the phrase "comfort food." As in, food that exists for the purpose of comfort. And all of that means that when we don't eat, sometimes the discomfort exposes things in us. I realized this one time while I was trying to eat really healthy. I started noticing that, during that season, I became a lot more grumpy of a person. And I think it was because I had grown accustomed to running to food (particularly, bad food) for comfort. So when I took away that comfort, a lot of the gunk in my heart quickly rose to the surface. And I would imagine that will happen for quite a few of us when we fast.

Now, the temptation in those moments—when sin gets exposed—will be to blame it on our hunger, right? We'll think, "well I wouldn't have done that if I wasn't fasting." "I wouldn't have treated that person that way, said that thing, if I wasn't fasting." But then you remember that Jesus says that's not how sin works. He says sin comes from the "overflow of one's heart."² Fasting doesn't generate sin in us—it exposes the sin that was already there. The sin that we had perhaps grown really good at hiding when we could pacify it with food.

The biblical authors often talk about the process of God growing and sanctifying us by employing the language of refining certain metals. So if you want to get a valuable metal, (like gold) to its purest form, what you generally do is you put it in extreme heat—like a furnace. And what that heat does is that it exposes and burns away the impurities in the metal so that what you have left is the most beautiful, purest form. The Scriptures say that that is what God often does with us. And he uses a lot of different sources to apply

¹ Richard Foster, *The Celebration of Discipline*, p. 55 (Kindle Edition).

² See Matthew 15:18-20

the heat. But I think one way we can sort of apply that heat “on our own” is through fasting.

So if you’re participating in fasting with us during this series, **as unpleasant as it may be**: allow your fast to *expose* any *sin* that it needs to expose in your heart. Allow it to reveal to you *who you are* when you take away small comforts like food in your life. And if or when it does, don’t *blame* those things on the fast or on the hunger. Instead, see that as an opportunity to address things in your heart that get exposed. See it as an opportunity to be more fully *formed* into the image of Jesus. **Fasting helps sanctify us by exposing things in us.** And the *starting* point for *learning* self-control is recognizing those things, coming face-to-face *with* them, and then doing the work of confession and repentance to rid our lives *of* them. Does that make sense?

That’s the first way that fasting can help us learn self-control. The *other* way fasting helps us learn self-control, is through...

Training

Fasting *trains* us in self-control. It may help to think of fasting as a “**simulation**” of sorts. This past summer, I went to see **Top Gun: Maverick**, along with the rest of America. For those of you who *haven’t* seen it, it is *fantastic*. One of those rare times where a sequel released decades later actually *didn’t* ruin the whole franchise. Plus, Tom Cruise once again proved to us all that he is aging in reverse, which I can only assume is due to a deal he has made with the devil. Overall, just a really, really good movie.

But if you haven’t seen it (no spoilers here), **most of the movie is** a group of pilots running a *simulation* for a mission that they go on at the *end* of the movie. The mission they’re going on is *incredibly difficult*, in enemy territory. So they run mock scenarios *like* the mission over and over again, to make sure they are sufficiently prepared for the real thing. That’s the idea behind a *simulation*: that by doing something *resembling* the real thing over and over and over again, you gain the ability to do the real thing well.

That, I think, is one really helpful way to think about *fasting*. **When you fast**, you are essentially running a *simulation* for self-control. You are saying *no* to yourself in a relatively *small* way (by not eating when you’re hungry), in the hopes that it will improve your ability to say no to yourself in even more *significant* ways as a **result**. You’re running a *simulation* that will help you *learn self-control*. I don’t think it’s any coincidence that Jesus fasts for forty days and forty nights in the gospels, right before Satan tempts him in three pretty significant ways.³

³ See Luke 4:1-13

Now what's interesting is that the **science actually backs this up**. Psychologists and social scientists have been discovering for a while now that our *willpower* as human beings actually functions a lot like a *muscle*.⁴ In other words, the amount of willpower you're *born* with isn't *set in stone*. Rather, your willpower can be *exercised* and *trained*, such that it grows and becomes *stronger* as a result. And just like how, when you *neglect* to work out your muscles, they become weak—the same is true when you neglect to “work out” your willpower: you become less and less able to exercise self-control.

So you **see where this is going**: **if you want to grow in self-control, you will have to work out that “muscle.”** And at least *one* way to do that is via *fasting*. Here's how the one and only **St. Augustine** put it—a brilliant thinker from the early days of the Church. He was once asked *why* he chose to *fast* semi-regularly in his life. Here was his answer:

...it is sometimes necessary to check the delight of the flesh in respect to licit pleasures in order to keep it from yielding to illicit joys.

So, just in case **that terminology** was confusing to you: by “*licit*” pleasures, he means things we *enjoy* that *aren't* inherently sinful (like *food*). There's nothing wrong or sinful about eating food, so long as it doesn't morph into something like *gluttony*. *But*, Augustine says, **sometimes it's helpful to abstain from *licit* pleasures** (like we do with food when we *fast*), **in order to learn how to resist *illicit* pleasures** (things that *are* inherently *sinful*). In other words, **saying no to *neutral* things can help us learn how to say no to *sinful* things.**

Now, those of **you who have read much Augustine** know that one of his *chief* personal struggles was with *sexual* sin. By all indications, he struggled with what we would probably label as *sexual addiction* today. So when he says that things like *fasting* can be *helpful* in learning to say no to our flesh, he isn't speaking *abstractly*; he's speaking from the *trenches* of struggle with temptation. And to him, *abstaining* from pleasures like food for a period of time was a way of *learning* and *growing* in self-control.

And **he wasn't alone in believing this** about fasting. Christians through the centuries have noticed that when a person *fasts*—choosing to deny themselves something basic like food—other, more *sinful* desires seem to lose their appeal over time. And the inverse is also true: when a person has a hard time ever denying themselves *food*, often they have a hard time denying themselves *other* pleasures that are even more enticing.

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⁴ [This](#) is a good summary of this idea (and also has links to numerous related articles within it).

So I want to **ask you to do something** with me. I want you to, right now, in your mind, consider what sinful tendency in your life you have the *most* difficulty saying “no” to. Could be a variety of things. Maybe for you it’s **sexual gratification**, like it was for Augustine. Whether that’s sex with someone you’re not married to, or a struggle with porn or with lust in general—maybe that’s your chief struggle. Or, maybe for you, the struggle is **consumerism or materialism**; you have an incredibly difficult time saying “no” to buying things you don’t really need. Maybe it’s **anger**. Maybe it’s **gossip**. // Maybe for you, the struggle is with **food itself**: you find yourself regularly overeating and eating in ways that are detrimental to your health over the long haul.

And I’m sure there are **so many other things** we could name. But what is the sinful desire that you have the most *difficult* time saying “no” to in your life? I want you to **place that thing** in your mind. And once you do, I just want to ask you: do you *want* to be *done* with that struggle? Do you *want* that thing *not* to have mastery over you anymore? Are you ready to be done with the cycle of shame, and regret, and self-condemnation, and *frustration* that that thing causes in your life? Are you ready to stop feeling like a “city without any walls”?

Okay, then **here’s what I want you to realize** this morning: **God wants you to be done with those things too.** *He* wants you to experience the *relief* and the *freedom* that comes from walking by the Spirit and not gratifying the desires of the flesh. In fact, I’d say it’s a pretty big deal to him. He is very much on your team and you are on his when the objective is *freedom* from sinful desires that enslave us. *He* wants you to be done with those things even more than *you* want you to be done with them.

And **if you are in Christ**, I need you to hear this: **you are not “stuck”** in your sin. You are not *destined* to always struggle with the things you struggle with right now. You are not *defined* by your past or current failures. Jesus went to the cross and came back from the grave, at least in part, to *debunk* that narrative we tend to believe about ourselves. And he gave us his *Spirit* to empower us to live out of a different narrative altogether. I think of Paul’s words to Timothy, where he says, “the Spirit God gave us does not make us *timid*, but gives us *power, love, and* (notice this) *self-discipline.*”⁵ Or self-control.

You can learn to say no to your sin. You *can* learn to live with self-control. You *can* learn freedom from the things that currently control you. If you know Jesus, *all* of that is possible for you, through the cross and resurrection. And in the Scriptures, by his grace, he has given us *tools* to be utilized to that end. *Fasting* is one of them. Now it’s not the *only* one, to be sure. But it is a really, really *helpful* one. And if you’re currently struggling,

⁵ 2 Timothy 1:7

fasting *could be* one way that he wants to help *teach* you self-control. That he wants to establish in you, over time, the ability to say “no” to the flesh and “yes” to the Spirit.

So right now, you may feel like there’s no way you can ever say “no” to sexual temptation. It just feels like that is an *impossibility* for you. And there may be some truth to that. If that is the thing that runs your life, you may not have the self-control required, *right now*, to say no. You might not feel like you *can* say “no” to *overspending*. To *anger*. To *overeating*. To *gossip*. You might look at those things right now and think “there’s no way I can say no to those things.” And you might be right: right *now*, you don’t possess that ability. **But it’s not that you *can’t*; it’s that you *can’t yet*.** You can *learn* it. If you know and follow Jesus, the Holy Spirit is available to you and ready to help you *learn* self-control. It won’t be *automatic*. It takes *practice*. But it *can* happen. God *wants* it to happen. And he’s asking you to join *him* in that journey towards freedom. And that’s what things like *fasting* can help us with.

But it’s here that we **need to clarify one important thing**. This series is about *fasting*, and I’ve done my best this morning to show you one potential *benefit* of fasting: growing self-control. But I want to be very clear that **fasting does not have any power in and of itself**. Fasting is just, as we’ve mentioned, a *practice*. It is simply one particular *means* through which God can work to make us more like him as we participate in it. Fasting doesn’t contain any transformative *power* in itself. People all over the world that want nothing to do with Jesus participate in fasting. **For followers of Jesus, where the power comes from, is different**. Take a look with me at **Titus 2**, up on the screen:

*For the **grace of God** has appeared, that offers **salvation** to all people. It (that is, the grace of God) **teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions** (that sounds familiar), **and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age...**⁶*

So while **fasting can serve** as the **means by which** God teaches us things like self-control; fasting isn’t actually what holds the *power* to teach us. The *power* actually comes from Jesus himself. From what Paul calls “the grace of God.” In other words, from the *gospel*. The *gospel* teaches us that Jesus *gave himself up* for us, in part, so that we could find *freedom* from the things that enslave us. And it’s only once we realize *that*, that we will be inclined to join him in the effort to *live into* that freedom.

So it might help to **think about it like a car**. If a *car* is a spiritual practice like fasting, the *gospel* is the *fuel*. It’s the gasoline. Without *fuel*, you might have a nice metal box to sit

⁶ Titus 2:11-12

in, but you're not going to get much of anywhere that you need to go. Similarly, participating in the spiritual disciplines without relying on the gospel might be neat or interesting for a time, but it's not going to get you much of anywhere in terms of growth or maturity or transformation.

But **at the same time, fuel by itself** won't get you very far in discipleship to Jesus either. You can sit and stare at fuel all day long, and it's not gonna get you any further down the road. And similarly, we can sit and *admire* the truth of the gospel all we want, but if we refuse to participate in ways for it to fuel us down the road of discipleship, we've missed the point. **To become more like Jesus, we need the fuel, but we also need a means by which the fuel can do its job.** We need gospel to *be* the transformative power, and we also need some kind of *means by which* that gospel can be implemented and utilized in our day-to-day lives.

And **that's what fasting**, along with other practices, are intended to do in our lives. They help us take the truth of the gospel—that Jesus has redeemed us from our sin—and they help us put that truth into *practice* in tangible ways. They help us *learn* the things we already know. That make sense?

So as we mentioned last Sunday, **participation in fasting** during this series is totally optional. We're not making anybody do anything. You may have considered it and thought about it, and concluded that right now just isn't the right season for you to do it. That's totally fine. There can be good reasons for that conclusion. **But I would at least ask you to consider why that is your response.** If that's your response because it wouldn't be healthy for you at this point with other stuff you've got going on, no worries.

But if fasting isn't appealing to you because the idea of *self-control in general* isn't appealing to you, I would ask that you think a little more critically about that reaction. If you're not interested in fasting because you're not really all that interested in denying yourself anything you want, I'd think again. Because it *could* be that you are actually neglecting something that would be very *beneficial* to you, and to your discipleship to Jesus. After all, let's not forget Jesus' most frequent invitation to his movement in the gospels: "whoever wants to be my disciple must *deny themselves*, pick up their cross, and follow me."

There is **simply no way around it:** following Jesus will require that you learn—not just *self-control*, but according to Jesus, *self-denial*. **So if you are regularly practicing self-control, and you decide right now isn't the time to fast: that can be totally fine. But if you don't want to fast, and you aren't doing so hot at self-control, you may want to consider fasting.** Make sense?

In all of this, our desire should be to become more like Jesus: the guy who denied himself, picked up *his* cross, and *through* the cross, invited us to do the same. So as we come to the tables in a few moments and take communion, that's one central thing we're remembering. We're remembering that Jesus denied himself and picked up *his* cross for us. And that by doing that, he granted us life forever with him. Life that starts now, with things like learning self-control, and life that continues into eternity with him. If it weren't for the cross, none of that would be a possibility. But *because* of the cross, it's a *reality* for those of us who have chosen to follow him. So as we go to the tables together, we remember that.

Let's pray and we'll respond.