

James 3:2-12; Romans 6:12-19
 “A Fruitful Life of Self-Control”

Some of you may remember the old commercial jingle: “My bologna has a first name. It’s O-s-c-a-r. My bologna has a second name; it’s corn syrup, sodium lactate, autolyzed yeast, sodium phosphate, sodium nitrite, potassium phosphate, sugar, dextrose, and mechanically separated chicken!”

Well, that’s not quite how the jingle goes, but that’s some of the ingredients listed on the bologna package! It may not sound as tasty as M-e-y-e-r, but there it is! Sugars, preservatives, and weird stuff!

Food is a funny thing! Most of us know that we are what we eat! The link between food, exercise, and our well-being is so immediate, so profound, yet most of us have no idea that how we feel can be linked to what we eat, that our various complaints and conditions and moods and energy (or lack of energy) are driven by the fuel we put into our body.

Food has the power to heal us! It is the most potent tool we have to help prevent and treat many of our chronic diseases – including diabetes and obesity. What you put on your fork literally has the power to make you sick or make you well, to make you slim or fat, to deplete you or energize you!

Did you know that most food packages and labels tell us what a portion size should be? [Examples: 10 potato chips: 150 calories; 2 cookies: 160 calories; 1/4 cup of peanut M&M’s: 220 calories] Did you ever walk on the “wild side” and eat more than one portion?

Is there anybody guilty of eating more than a recommended serving size? And how often are we doing that?

Here’s the bigger question: How are you doing with will-power and self-control?

We may be sick in a lot of different ways because we can’t get a handle on self-control! But God has a plan for that!

The *Fruit of the Spirit* includes temperance, or self-control!

Can you think of an example when you knew you shouldn’t do something, you’d been warned about it, you told yourself you’d never do it, or maybe it was the same old temptation and you promised yourself and swore you’d resist the next time...! But eventually you were sucked in again, and the shame was unbearable!

One of the typical ways we deal with those sins that are such a tough habit to break is with will-power and determination! Whatever that “impulse” or temptation may be for us – the anger impulse, impatience, bitterness, gluttony, pride, lust, alcohol, greed, or fear – we just set our mind and decide ...we will never do it again! We will never lose our temper! We will never worry about that! We pray against it! We fight against it! We set our will against it...!

But it’s all in vain, because we find ourselves once more embarrassed and ashamed.

The moment we think we can succeed and overcome our sin by the strength of will-power alone is the moment we are worshiping the self-will. And someone once said, “As long as we think we can save ourselves by our own will-power, we will only make the evil in us stronger than ever.” (Heini Arnold; in *Celebration of Discipline*; pg. 4)

I don’t mean to say that we can’t achieve some satisfaction through strong will-power, but let’s realize that human-power is limited power. We’re leaving out the spiritual dimension

altogether. That's the fatal flaw in any secular self-improvement, self-enhancing best-selling book.

The Bible says when God gives us His Spirit **“it is a Spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline!”** (2 Timothy 1:7) We need God's Spirit and power!

The theme we're examining today is the difference between our own will-power and God's governing power, or God's grace! Here's a story that explains the difference! It's the story of a highly successful businessman who had never received a big break on his way to success. He had not inherited a thing. He worked for everything he had, and over the years hard work, combined with willpower, eventually paid off for him. His friend tells the story: I remember sitting in his office thinking that this guy could probably accomplish anything he set his mind to do. But then he shattered my strong-man perception of him. (Maxie Dunnam's *Living the Psalms*, pg. 46-47)

He told me about the drinking problem he had suffered for several years. He had tried to keep it a secret from everyone, but eventually he had to face the fact that it was a disease and that he needed treatment. He entered an alcohol treatment center and was determined to beat his problem. Normally, a person is in treatment for at least thirty days before he's ready to be released. But not this man! After twenty-seven days, he had not experienced any real growth and decided he would discharge himself from the program.

The next morning, on the twenty-eighth day of treatment, something happened to this man that changed his life and his perception of himself. Here's what he had to say:

“I had thought all along that these people were here to help me use my willpower. But finally I realized it had nothing to do with willpower. **Willpower is not the proper tool to use in trying to overcome something you cannot control. There was nothing I could will, there was nothing within my being that could affect the situation.**

“Suddenly, I realized that the only help I could count on was grace: a strength, a power, a force that was outside of me and other than me. For twenty-seven days I had tried to beat my disease by using sheer willpower. I didn't understand what they were trying to teach me! All through my life, willpower had always worked! But not this time. For it was only when I humbled myself, fell on my knees, admitted my total unbroken, unconditional powerlessness – only then was I on my road to recovery.”

Here was a man who came to experience grace! Here was a man who knew that strength and drive and willpower were not enough. Having heard his story, his friend asked him how he discovered whether grace was needed in his daily life. He said, “Each one of us is given a box containing two tools. Let's say one tool is a hammer and the other tool is a drill. If we need to drill a hole, the hammer won't be of any use. Try as we might, we cannot drill a hole with a hammer.

“Now let's say that we have another box. There are again two tools; one is willpower and the other is grace. Sometimes I need to use both of them. Other times I only need my own willpower. Sometimes, only the grace from God will work.”

Finally, his friend asked him how he knew which tool to use. With an air of spiritual confidence he quoted a well-known prayer used by twelve-step support groups: “God grant me the Serenity to accept the things I cannot change, Courage to change the things I can, and Wisdom to know the difference.”

The Bible speaks to us about the choices we face; the temptations and traps and sins. From the letter to the church in Rome, the Spirit of the Lord addresses Christian believers how to respond. [READING Romans 6:12-19]

¹² Do not let sin control the way you live; do not give in to sinful desires. ¹³ Do not let any part of your body become an instrument of evil to serve sin. Instead, give yourselves completely to God, for you were dead, but now you have new life. So use your whole body as an instrument to do what is right for the glory of God. ¹⁴ Sin is no longer your master, for you no longer live under the requirements of the law. Instead, you live under the freedom of God's grace.

¹⁵ Well then, since God's grace has set us free from the law, does that mean we can go on sinning? Of course not! ¹⁶ Don't you realize that you become the slave of whatever you choose to obey? You can be a slave to sin, which leads to death, or you can choose to obey God, which leads to righteous living. ¹⁷ Thank God! Once you were slaves of sin, but now you wholeheartedly obey this teaching we have given you. ¹⁸ Now you are free from your slavery to sin, and you have become slaves to righteous living.

¹⁹ Because of the weakness of your human nature, I am using the illustration of slavery to help you understand all this. Previously, you let yourselves be slaves to impurity and lawlessness, which led ever deeper into sin. Now you must give yourselves to be slaves to righteous living so that you will become holy.

The Bible says, "Do not let..." explaining to us that we have a responsibility – speaking directly to you – to make right choices. But we're not alone with will-power in our choosing. Remember? **"God gives us a Spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline!"**

But let's not be fooled! While we do have self-control through the Holy Spirit, we can override the Spirit's power and presence ...and eat more than we intended!

Thus, the warning: **Do not let sin control the way you live ...Instead, give yourselves completely to God.**

And here's the key for us today! "Give yourselves to God!" Completely, in all ways and all parts of who you are! Give your relationships, your career, your pleasures and passions, your profit and purpose! Because it is as we give ourselves to God that we are releasing ourselves from evil passions and a self-centered focus!

And if you're wondering on what basis you should give yourself to God – is God worthy? Well, the Bible tells us, **"You were dead, but now you have new life!"**

Yes, God rescued us from death; we were once controlled by sin, but no more! God has done for us what we could never do! He has made us righteous through faith in Jesus!

Then the last verse we read, vs. 19, brings home the point: "your human nature is weak," describing what we're learning today, that will-power is shallow and limited in its abilities.

And we end with the KEY we read earlier: In the old life, **you let yourselves be slaves to impurity and lawlessness, which led ever deeper into sin. Now you must give yourselves** (and there it is again) **to be slaves to righteous living so that you will become holy.**

Don't just give yourselves to God, but be a slave to righteous living! Be dedicated and committed, to make right choices!

I want to finish with seven strategies you can use to change from will-power to the fruit of the Spirit, to Self-Control in your life:

1. **Release Control.** Are you willing to give yourself to God? (If you're not sure God is good, which means you're not sure you can trust Him, please revisit the message from this series, "*A Fruitful Life of Goodness.*") Your willingness to release control is the key that opens the door, allowing the power of God to begin His reclamation project with you!

2. **Give Yourself Time.** Let's understand that fruit doesn't suddenly appear as mature! You need to allow time for God to work and to grow the fruit in your life.

3. **Accept the Change** God wants to bring in your life. Are you ready to accept God's help, trusting that He has your best in mind?

4. **Understand the Evils of Self-indulgence.** If you've identified the need for the Fruit of the Spirit in your life, you already know the evils of going overboard with those old passions or habits – like eating, drinking, shopping, romance, pornography, gambling, or gaming! While some of these have no negative effect for many of you, over-indulgence in any of these will create great pain in your relationships!

5. **Listen to the Spirit.** One of the reasons it's so important to read and study your Bibles is so that the Holy Spirit has seeds planted in your mind from which to draw as He reminds you from the Word of God what is the Word of God!

6. **Meet Together.** The Bible says: **Let's not neglect our meeting together, as some people do, but encourage one another, especially now that the day of Jesus' return is drawing near.** (Hebrews 10:24-25) The study groups and the time we spend in worship are important places for us to learn the dangers of self-will and to find the wisdom of God's people in surrendering.

7. And dare we forget the importance of **Prayer.** Richard Foster wrote about releasing control through prayer: "As we are learning to pray we discover an interesting progression. In the beginning our "will" struggles with God's "will." We beg. We pout. We demand. We expect God to perform like a magician or shower us with blessings like Father Christmas. We major in instant solutions and manipulating prayers.

"As tough as this time of struggle is, let's not despise it or try to avoid it. It's a necessary part of our growing and maturing in things spiritual. To be sure, it is an inferior stage, but only in the sense that a child is at an inferior stage to that of an adult. The adult can reason better and carry heavier loads because both brain and brawn are more fully developed, but the child is doing exactly what we would expect at that age. So it is in the life of the Spirit.

"In time, however, we enter into a grace-filled releasing of our will as we flow into the will of the Father. It is the Prayer of Surrender that moves us from the struggling to the releasing." (*Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*; pg. 47)

INVITATION: I believe that we will fail to surrender to the Spirit of God unless we believe that our actions or our attitudes are harmful, destructive to relationships, or corrupting to the inner life.

We have to hate the sin or hate what the sin is doing in our lives ...before we will seek God's grace, mercy, and love.

If you're at the end of your rope, don't give up! The prophet Isaiah spoke about the power of Jesus Christ 700 years before Jesus walked the earth when he foretold: **A child is born to us, a son is given to us. The government will rest on His shoulders. And He will be called: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.** (Isaiah 9:6) And I

want us to hear one word there today: *Government*. **The government will rest on His shoulders.** What have you supposed that to mean? The governments of the world? Yes. The government of heaven? Yes – that one day Jesus will reign as the absolute power of the universe!

But the prophet just might be talking about the governing power Jesus brings to you! The presence and power of Jesus will govern your life – when you yield to Him – and He will govern you with the fruit of His Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

I want you to hear, we will not always be successful with the spirit and power of self-control. We do not automatically steer clear of everything this is foul or harmful for you. We are people who stand in need of God's grace and mercy, day after day after day! Amen? The difference now, with the fruit of the Holy Spirit, is that we know now what is right and what is wrong, and we *desire* that which is noble, true, and right!

By the grace of God, not by any other effort, but by God's grace you will find freedom from the chains of sin and live into the fruit of His Spirit!

Don't you desire the heart of Jesus? The fruit of the Spirit? Is this the day – you are ready to make that decision to surrender and trust God with all the rest of your life?