

## Galatians 5 v 23 The fruit of the Spirit is self-control

### Introduction

All of us have faced many situations over the years where we have found it difficult to exercise self-control. It can be with respect to our emotions, our speech or our actions. In terms of emotions, for example, how we express our delight at our own success when we are aware others present have faced acute disappointment. Or how we react in the presence of acute grief to express genuine feelings yet not forgetting we are there to support other people in their times of deep sorrow; In terms of our words there are so many contexts in our homes, workplaces, churches and other social contexts where we need to express the greatest care in articulating our viewpoints so that we honour the Lord in the way we express ourselves. In the last twenty years in the United Kingdom there has been a dramatic collapse of public self-control of emotions. It may be that many people still conduct themselves with great dignity, but too many others have lost sight of what is appropriate. Too many so-called role models in society bring dishonour upon themselves and others by the way they carry on. I am very grateful to the new manager of the football team I support for having a word with the star centre-forward Diego Costa to stop the silly nonsense he was taking onto the field of play and returning to focussing on his immense skills as a player. The transformation of the team in recent weeks is significantly due to Costa's self-discipline and the resulting greater accomplishments on the field of play can in part be attributed to his and other players exercising greater self-control and sticking to their game plan. God is not a kill-joy in giving us boundaries for our behaviour in life. He knows that we will accomplish so much more and have a greater appreciation for the good things we enjoy, if we are willing to honour Him in our behavioural choices.

### 1. A model to follow (I Corinthians 9:24-27) *Run in such a way as to get the prize...*

It is very likely that the apostle Paul had attended the Isthmian Games held every three years in Corinth. These Greek games were the inspiration for the creation of the Olympic Games in the modern era. Paul draws attention to two of the sports he had witnessed in his words in the last section of I Corinthians chapter nine. *Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize.* <sup>25</sup> *Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last; but we do it to get a crown that will last for ever.* <sup>26</sup> *Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air.* <sup>27</sup> *No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize* (I Corinthians 9:24-27). He is absolutely clear that in order for an athlete to have any chance of winning the prize in their discipline that they had to go into strict training with an appropriate diet and general routine. Their focus had to be absolutely clear that anything that hindered their training had to be put to one side in order to be as fit as they could be in preparation for the big day. The margin of victory in such events is often extremely small so attention to detail was vitally important. An athlete may train for years to have one chance of winning the prize, but would they have the discipline and self-control to prepare appropriately to seize their opportunity? Likewise for the boxer it was not simply about attempting to land a knock-out blow, because a gifted opponent knew how to duck and weave and avoid many blows so care was required for skilful jabs to slow them down before the heavier blows could be administered to win the contest. But what was the prize for which they competed? It was a crown of laurel leaves that would wither within a few days and soon look well past its best! However, their dedication

was a model for the Christian believer who would discipline him or herself to be the best they could be in serving the Lord. Are you seeking to the best of your ability as a Christian to exercise self-control in your daily life? We are to keep in spiritual training until the day we die and go home to be with the Lord. Our reward is the commendation of King Jesus on the day when we stand before Him. (II Corinthians 5:9-10: *So we make it our goal to please Him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it.* <sup>10</sup> *For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each of us may receive what is due to us for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.* Is this your goal in 2017? At the end of our lives I trust we will all be able to say with Paul some words he wrote in his last known letter prior to his death. *I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.* <sup>8</sup> *Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day – and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing* (II Timothy 4:7-8). Paul has some principles he would like us to follow in daily life.

## 2. A routine to establish (I Timothy 4:7) *train yourself to be godly...*

The apostle Paul was very clear that we will accomplish the most we can in life if we are self-disciplined about the use of our bodies as well as our time and resources. It is an issue he raises in a number of his letters. For example: *Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; <sup>20</sup> you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your bodies* (I Corinthians 6:19). *Have nothing to do with godless myths and old wives' tales; rather, train yourself to be godly.* <sup>8</sup> *For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.* (I Timothy 4:7-8); *No one serving as a soldier gets entangled in civilian affairs, but rather tries to please his commanding officer.* <sup>5</sup> *Similarly, anyone who competes as an athlete does not receive the victor's crown except by competing according to the rules.* (II Timothy 2:4-5); He needed to make clear that he was not following the popular view of the day that the body was a prison the spirit needed to escape from, as this could lead to the legitimising of misuse of the human body; instead he views each part of who we are as a gift from God to be taken care of. Self-control for him was mastery over the whole person. However, it is not just our physical nature that needs to be controlled. In the section of Galatians 5 prior to the fruit of the Spirit Paul lists a range of inappropriate things described as '*acts of the sinful nature*' (Galatians 5:19-21), only a minority of them are referring to our physical appetites. Other sinful actions are the result of choices made by an *unspiritual mind* (Colossians 2:18); the discipline of the mind is at least as important as disciplining of our bodies. Jesus highlighted this point to His disciples in Mark 7:20-23: *He went on: 'What comes out of a person is what defiles them. <sup>21</sup> For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come – sexual immorality, theft, murder, <sup>22</sup> adultery, greed, malice, deceit, lewdness, envy, slander, arrogance and folly. <sup>23</sup> All these evils come from inside and defile a person.'* If a person has a fully-functioning conscience and exercises wisdom in their thought processes then most inappropriate actions will have been ruled out without much difficulty. However, because we are all sinful human beings there will always be some issue small or big on which we need to work. It is more likely to be a battle to respond appropriately to legitimate human desires than those that are obviously morally wrong in themselves. He expressed it this way in the letter to the church in Rome. *Do not offer any part of yourself to sin as an instrument of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer every part of yourself to him as an instrument of righteousness* (Romans 6:13). Our bodies are *temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; <sup>20</sup> you were bought at a price. Therefore honour God with your bodies* (I Corinthians 6:19). We are called –using Paul's imagery to be Christian 'athletes' not Christian 'ascetics' who deliberately deny themselves

any legitimate pleasure in the beautiful world God created. Are we willing to take up the challenge to be the people He created us to be?

3. **A standard to set** (I Corinthians 9:25a) *self-control in all things...*

*Now every athlete who [goes into training and] competes in the games is disciplined and exercises self-control in all things* (I Corinthians 9:25a Amplified Bible); the point here is obvious. An athlete who sticks rigidly to their training plan but eats only ‘take-aways’ or who consumes significant quantities of alcohol is likely to fail to attain their full potential. In our culture it seems that some people are obsessive about watching one area of their lives but extremely careless about other things which tend to undermine the potential benefits they might have gained. What Paul needs his first hearers and readers, and us to grasp is that we need to have control of each area of our lives to be most effective as the person God wants us to be. A person may be disciplined and do well in the workplace but spend so much time on a hobby that their family loses out. Or in any one area of their lives at the expense of others; one of my greatest disappointments in ministry is seeing professing Christians put something else in the place of the Lord and time for meeting with His people in Sunday worship and Christian service. The very first of the Ten Commandments is to give God first place in our lives –to do less is to fail in the most important thing we can do as a Christian. Does He have first place in your life at this time? On the day I wrote this sermon there was a story on the news from Japan on a company whose boss required a ridiculous number of hours from his staff and who was forced to resign from his post after a young employee in their twenties committed suicide because of excessive hours at work – the employee was working every day into the early hours of the morning and had absolutely no life outside of work at all. The challenge for all of us is this: what is my area of weakness on which I need to work this year in order to be a follower of Jesus who brings joy to Him through the choices I make? Is there some area of my life that has overstepped the boundary of what should be my priorities? For some people making more money or promotions in work has resulted in the loss of time for family or for attendance at church on God’s day. If this is an area in need of attention then we need to keep before us that we work to live **not** live to work! There are other people too influenced in their choices by people close to them who have yet to come to faith and who yield to pressure to use God’s time in our lives to do other less important things. It maybe that better strategic planning in the year to come may enable a better balance of activities in our weekly schedules. It may be the person who thinks they have got everything ‘sorted’ that needs to keep a watch. Remember how King David captured Jerusalem from the Jebusites 3,000 years ago. In II Samuel 5:6-8 records: *The king and his men marched to Jerusalem to attack the Jebusites, who lived there. The Jebusites said to David, ‘You will not get in here; even the blind and the lame can ward you off.’ They thought, ‘David cannot get in here.’*<sup>7</sup> *Nevertheless, David captured the fortress of Zion – which is the City of David.*<sup>8</sup> *On that day David had said, ‘Anyone who conquers the Jebusites will have to use the water shaft to reach those “lame and blind” who are David’s enemies.* This was one of many ancient fortified cities captured because of a simple oversight of a route into the city. It is a reminder of the importance of keeping a watch over each area of our lives. There are possibly some things we know we struggle with and so are careful to honour the Lord when faced with a challenge in that area. However, it might be complacency in something we had regarded as a strength that can on occasions lead to someone’s fall into sin or into a serious mistake. Ongoing self-control over each area of our lives is about character formation and retention. It enables us to grow into more of the person God created us to be and accomplish more of the goals and opportunities He allows to cross our pathway. The person that honours Him will in His time and way be honoured by God.

#### 4. **A principle to apply** ‘moderation in all things’

Other biblical writers encourage the development of the same character qualities as Paul, though using their own form of expression. Here in his second letter Peter highlights certain qualities including *self-control*.<sup>5</sup> *For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; <sup>6</sup>and to knowledge, **self-control**; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; <sup>7</sup>and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love. <sup>8</sup>**For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive in your knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>9</sup>But whoever does not have them is short-sighted and blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their past sins.**<sup>10</sup> *Therefore, my brothers and sisters, **make every effort** to confirm your calling and election. For if you do these things, you will never stumble, <sup>11</sup>and you will receive a rich welcome into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.* (II Peter 1:5-10). In addition, to various human character qualities some writers draw attention to the wisdom displayed by other creatures. In a passage giving a warning to people tempted to laziness the author of Proverbs 6:6-8 highlighted the dedicated planned lifestyle of the ant as a model to copy in terms of the aspects of ant life that are highlighted: *Go to the ant, you sluggard; consider its ways and be wise! <sup>7</sup>It has no commander, no overseer or ruler, <sup>8</sup>yet it stores its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest.* In what areas of our lives might we want to apply this principle of temperance or moderation?*

(a) **In our diet** (i) **food** we are incredibly blessed with the greatest variety of food and drinks people on these islands have ever had to enjoy. Until the mid-nineteenth century there were rural Highland and Island communities in Scotland that faced the genuine risks of starvation if, for example, the potato crop failed. Everyone is aware of the horrific famine in Ireland between 1845 and 1852 in which one million people died of hunger and a similar number emigrated to the British mainland or further afield to places like America. We don't even need to wait to see if a product is in season as often it can be flown in from another part of the world. The challenge in the Western world for the overwhelming majority is not can I find enough food to eat, but am I disciplined enough in the choices I make about the quantities of food I consume and the variety of food types to enable me to have a healthy balanced diet. Are we sufficiently appreciative of the choices before us and do we remember to say thank you to God for the food provided for us at meal times? The epidemic of obesity in North America and Western Europe is in part caused by a failure of self-control in diets. Although in times of serious economic downturns eating healthily can be a real problem for the economically disadvantaged. The rapid growth in the numbers of people using foodbanks in the UK in recent years reveals serious challenges that need to be addressed. We are given our senses by God to experience real pleasure in the food we eat, but we do so in a controlled way so as to avoid harming our bodies by inappropriate quantities of good food or the wrong kinds of foodstuffs. (ii) **drink** One of the saddest blights in our contemporary society are the struggles of people who suffer from an addiction to alcohol or some other substance on which they have become dependent. There are plenty of passages in the Old Testament that speak of enjoying wine in moderation, but in the New Testament although still permitted as the standard drink of the day there are significant warnings about what we ought to consume and how we ought to view it. In I Corinthians 10:31-32 Paul wrote: *So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. <sup>32</sup>**Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God.*** There were debates in the Early Church about whether to abstain from eating meat because the vast majority of meat sellers in the markets would have had

their products prayed over in the Temples before sale. Even more surprisingly in a culture where non-alcoholic drinks had not been invented and most water supplies were less than suitable for drinking without health risks, discussions about abstaining from alcohol were also taking place. How did Paul advise the church at Rome? There was a principle issue raised in Romans 14:13: *Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind **not to put any stumbling-block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister.*** My choices are not merely my preferences but decisions taken with wisdom as to how our choices affect other people around us. We are free to enjoy God's gifts in food and drinks but could the exercise of my freedom cause a stumbling-block for someone else? Paul went on to say in Romans 14:20-21: *Do not destroy the work of God for the sake of food. All food is clean, but it is wrong for a person to eat anything **that causes someone else to stumble.*** <sup>21</sup> *It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or to **do anything else that will cause your brother or sister to fall.*** Self-control is not just about ourselves and what we chose to do, it also takes into account how our choices affect the lives of other people around us. There are things you and I may be free to do, but voluntarily for the benefit of other people we may chose not to eat or drink certain things.

(b) **In the use of our tongue** (James 3:1-12) James 3:5-10 states: *Likewise, the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark.* <sup>6</sup> *The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole body, sets the whole course of one's life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.* <sup>7</sup> *All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and sea creatures are being tamed and have been tamed by mankind,* <sup>8</sup> *but no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison.* <sup>9</sup> *With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God's likeness.* <sup>10</sup> *Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be.* Words can build people up when aptly chosen and inspire them or like a hand grenade in an enclosed space they can cause devastation. The failure to exercise tongue control in the recent American Presidential election has significantly demeaned that electoral process this time round and this is profoundly sad. However, on far too many occasions we have to admit that we ourselves or other people have failed to know when to speak and when to be silent; when to be gracious and when to be firm in the responses we make in conversation. If we win an argument but lose the person we have failed miserably. The Bible reminds us of the prohibition **on lying**: *Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to your neighbour* (Ephesians 4:25; also Proverbs 25:18); **on foul and degrading speech**: *Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen* (Ephesians 4:29); **on insulting and abusive language**: a person who speaks in this way is compared to a ruined city in Proverbs 25:28: *Like a city whose walls are broken through **is a person who lacks self-control.*** Expressed in a more positive way Proverbs 16:32 explains the significance of self-control of our speech: *Better a patient person than a warrior, one with self-control than one who takes a city.* How do we control our tongues? We must always think carefully before we speak because after words have come out we cannot recall them. Psalm 141:3 declares: ***Set a guard over my mouth, Lord; keep watch over the door of my lips.*** Are there times when you and I need to pray this as a prayer? We must also speak truthfully. It is a battle to weigh our words because we can speak truthfully yet give a false impression of someone or something; we can give a partial account of something that leads the hearer to draw conclusions that are not warranted by a fuller presentation of the facts on the subject in question. What is the standard we are aiming for? David in Psalm 15:2 states: *The one whose way of life is blameless, who does what is righteous, **who speaks the truth from their heart;*** we must also speak wisely; some things are better said one-to-one in private rather than in public; some things are better left unsaid! Yet on other occasions because of our genuine Christian love of another person or people we will speak up

–sometimes at a cost to ourselves. Self-control in the use of our tongues may be the hardest challenge we undertake!

(c) **Attitudes to sex and sexuality** In our contemporary culture one of the most difficult areas over which to exercise self-control is in controlling our thoughts and desires in the area of sex and sexuality. We live currently at a time when basic moral boundaries have been challenged and contested at every point. Yet the changes of the last fifty years have not brought greater happiness and more successful relationships for many people. The explosion in availability of on-line pornography has resulted in a small but growing number of people unable to view people of the opposite gender appropriately; the rise in sexting amongst some younger people is one sad fruit of this problem- incidentally creating ever more difficult disciplinary matters for teachers and parents to address amongst school age children. God's moral boundaries of abstinence outside of Christian marriage and faithfulness within it are not the unfair restrictions some make them out to be. Likewise parents don't give young children boxes of matches in their Christmas stockings –the risks are too high! The fruit of the Spirit is self-control. We need to take care what we watch on TV and in the cinema as well as on the internet. So easily we can become desensitised by blurring the boundaries and placing ourselves at risk of making choices we might later regret. Jesus' advice in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:27-29 in this area sounds shocking –but He was not speaking literally as that would not solve the problem! He meant that we should take the necessary steps to keep ourselves from moral failures. Are there changes you and I need to make to ensure we keep ourselves right before God? In addition, not only can we do what is best for ourselves; by a good example, we may be encouraging other people in our workplace or in our circle of friends to also make right choices.

(d) **Under the rule of Christ** (Galatians 5:23b-25) *Against such things there is no law.* <sup>24</sup> *Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.* <sup>25</sup> *Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.* If an athlete or gymnast can spend a decade or two in the strictest training simply to reach an Olympic final then the people of God who are looking forward to a greater honour when we stand before our Lord and Saviour can exercise self-control over our choices. We succeed one day at a time for which His grace is sufficient. But for the grace of God each of us could potentially commit all kinds of sin but with His assistance we can overcome the tests and temptations that will cross our pathway. I Corinthians 10:13 is a promise that is a wonderful assurance too. *No temptation has overtaken you except what is common to mankind. And God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, He will also provide a way out so that you can endure it.* With the aid of the Holy Spirit we can exercise control over our attitudes, speech and conduct. Remember Jesus' words in Matthew 6:33: *But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.* God will honour you and me as we honour Him. May God by His Spirit enrich and strengthen you as you live for Him and display the fruit of the Spirit in your life day by day, for Jesus' sake, Amen.