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*Fruit-full: SELF-CONTROL*  
Romans 7:14-25; Proverbs 25:28; Galatians 5:22-23  
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Today we conclude our 9-week sermon series on the 9 attributes of the Fruit of the Spirit. Let's say Galatians 5:22-23 together, either from memory, from your Bible, or the back of your bulletin . . .

Here are some things we've learned throughout the past nine weeks: 1). God created each one of us to be fruitful. 2). The fruit of the Spirit isn't something we achieve by trying harder and working smarter, but qualities that the Spirit brings forth in each and every one of us as we abide in Christ, remembering that Jesus said, "I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15:5) 3). God doesn't give some people love and joy but not generosity, and God doesn't give others patience and kindness but not peace. All of us have the seeds of all the fruit within us. We're just at different stages of maturity and development. 4). We can be fruitful at any age. Just as a well-established, mature citrus tree bears more fruit than a younger one, we often find that it's the older, more mature Christian who produces the bumper crop of love, joy, peace, and all the rest. When our trunks are thick and our limbs look gnarled and aged, we may be producing more spiritual fruit than ever. 5). The fruit of the Spirit is good stuff! Just like physical fruit, it's good for us, it builds us up, and it's delicious!

To me, one of the most delicious fruits is pineapple. I could eat that every day, and never get tired of it. But I don't, and here's why. Almost every week when I go grocery shopping, and I hit the produce section, I carefully select a pineapple and put it in my shopping cart. When I get home, I put it out on the counter until I'm ready to cut it up and eat it. Problem is, cutting up

a pineapple is a process. You have to cut off the top, and cut it in quarters lengthwise, and cut the main part of the fruit away from the prickly outer layer, and then for each of those quarters you have to cut off the hard core and throw that away, and then you can slice up the rest of the fruit. It's messy and hard, and when I get home from work, the prospect of cutting up a pineapple is sometimes more than I can take. So the pineapple sits there all week, uncut, uneaten, until I finally throw it in the trash at the end of the week, only to buy a new one at the grocery store and start the process all over again. I probably eat only one out of every three or four pineapples that I buy.

It's a little bit like self-control. Self-control is hard! But once we get to it, it is so, so sweet, and so, so good.

Self-control is the parent who refrains from bullying the coach when their child doesn't get the playing time the parent thinks he or she deserves; it's leaving the party while we're still sober enough to drive home safely; refusing to retaliate when we hear something hurtful and offensive, whether in person or on Facebook; it's declining the second piece of cake; conquering the urge to spread a juicy piece of gossip; and putting our phones down in order to be fully present. It's walking away from unnecessary purchases that will just go to waste, like me and my pineapples. It's every police officer who carefully uses only the amount of force necessary to restrain someone, even when that someone is shouting out insults and resisting arrest and making it really, really difficult for that officer to do his or her job safely.

On the flip side, when a person lacks self-control, it really is like the Proverb says: a city breached, without walls. When a city doesn't have walls, the enemy comes in and takes it. An addict can lose their job, their children, their home, and still keep seeking more of whatever they're addicted to. Same thing with domestic violence—a man who can't stop beating his wife

or girlfriend will eventually lose what he is so desperate to keep, either because she leaves or because he kills her. Extremely famous people have ruined their careers with just one or two thoughtless comments, uttered—or tweeted--in the heat of the moment.

I once served a church where an elder on the session lost his temper with the church treasurer. He didn't hit her, or touch her physically in any way, but he did raise his voice. And by the way, all men need to know that when you raise your voice at a woman, it can be very scary, even if you would never dream of laying a hand on her, and even if you are smaller than she is, because even smaller men can do damage when they're mad, and yelling implies loss of control, which may or may not lead to physical violence. Yelling is a form of violence.

Anyway, this elder was a guy who was very, very fit. He clearly spent a lot of time at the gym. Whatever he wore, the bulge of his muscles was visible through the sleeves of his shirt. In fact, I wondered at the time if the guy might have been on steroids.

But a man—or woman--who cannot control their temper is not a strong person, no matter how big their muscles are, and no fair blaming the steroids. Whereas, the person who does control their temper is a giant, no matter what their physical size might be.

I don't know if you caught this last week but at the very end of his sermon on gentleness, Pat said, "There is a reason that love and self-control are the bookends of this list of qualities that make up the fruit of the Spirit." All of these qualities are interconnected, but these two really do hold everything together. Because when we truly love someone, we control our behavior towards them. And a person who is able to control where they place their attention is better able to appreciate the beauty around them, and will cultivate more joy. From there, it's pretty easy to see how self-control contributes to peace, patience, kindness, and all the rest. If love is the basket that holds the fruit, self-control is the handle on that basket.

But as I said earlier, self-control is hard. Even those who ooze self-discipline and confidence struggle with self-control from time to time. As the Apostle Paul writes, “I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” And, “I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.”

I have a weakness for red, chewy candy. Hot Tamales, Twizzlers, Red Vines, Swedish Fish, Cinnamon Bears, Sour Patch Kids, you name it. If it is front of me, I will eat it, even if I’m not hungry, trying to cut back on sugar, just ate breakfast, doesn’t matter. Sometimes I’ve had to throw candy in the trash to keep from eating it. Otherwise I’ll do what I hate, which is to eat too much food that isn’t even food, and feel bad.

Far worse are the times I say something hurtful to somebody I love. I want only to say things that are helpful, things that bless and encourage and delight and build up, and instead I do what I hate, which is to tear down and wound. And the worst part is, I know what I’m doing, but in my weakness I do it anyway. Actually, the worst part is that red chewy candy and hurtful comments are just two of many examples I could share with you, of doing things I don’t want to do.

There are all kinds of books and resources out there about how we can gain control of ourselves, live our best lives, and just generally get our act together better than we already do. If those are helpful for you, great. But ultimately this is a spiritual matter. We have all sinned, and fall short of the glory of God, every single one of us (Romans 3:23). As we’ve said earlier, the fruit of the Spirit is something the Spirit produces, not something we achieve on our own steam. Rather than simply trying harder to do better, which so often ends in failure and shame, we can make more room for the Spirit. And one of the ways we do this is through confession.

Have you ever wondered why Presbyterians have a prayer of confession each and every week in worship? Not to make us feel like bad people, but to remind us of our profound, absolute need for God's grace. Jesus said, "Apart from me you can do nothing." We need this reminder every day, and there's a special power in gathering each week to pray these prayers together, in one another's presence, hearing the voices of fellow believers and hearing ourselves say these words out loud.

When we really know our need for God, it gives the Spirit room to MOVE in our lives, and I mean move. As I have learned to abide more and more with Christ, I find it's harder for me to feel offended by dumb things people say, and let me be clear—I think I hear MORE dumb things than I used to, but somehow I'm not as offended by them. I don't have as much time or energy for things like being offended. It's not even interesting anymore.

Abiding in Christ, it's harder to judge others. It's harder to make excuses, harder to blame, harder to get angry. It's easier to accept people, and easier to forgive them. And it even becomes easier to walk away from the red chewy candy, to get up and cut the pineapple, and consider if the sharp words at the tip of my tongue need to escape from my mouth. I might even discover that sharp words don't come to mind as quickly as they used to.

A favorite verse for many Christians is Philippians 4:13—I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. I can't do them on my own, but I can through the power of the Christ's Spirit who lives within me. It really comes down to that. Do we trust this promise? Can we embrace the reality and responsibility that the Spirit really is working in our lives all the time, to produce love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control? Can we live as though we believe this? If we can, I think we'll have all the fruit we'll ever need . . .

