Faith vs. Flesh: The Fruit of the Spirit – Self Control
September 14, 2025

Today we wrap up our sermon series, Faith vs. Flesh: The Fruit of the Spirit. This morning we will focus on the final characteristic of the fruit of the Spirit. As the expression goes, it is last but definitely not least. That final fruit is self-control. Here again are our focus verses. (Galatians 5:16-17, 19a, 22-23) 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 do not do whatever you want. The acts of the flesh are obvious … But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. (1 Timothy 1:17) Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Here's a quick review of something we discussed in last week's sermon. I think it is helpful for us to understand this, and thereby to better understand the order of the characteristics of the fruit of the Spirit. The first four characteristics of the Fruit of the Spirit are largely internal. They recognize the awesomeness of our God, and they significantly impact the way we feel about our God, and consequently the way we think and the way we feel in general. Those four characteristics are love, joy, peace, and forbearance (perhaps summarized as "patient endurance"). Those first four characteristics positively impact us internally. They also fuel the next five characteristics, which are largely external. The final five characteristics are kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Because we have the internal blessings of love, joy, peace. and forbearance through our gracious God, we therefore demonstrate outwardly to God and others the blessings of kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Of course, that's an oversimplification. The first four characteristics also show themselves outwardly, and the next five are also internal. But I thought restating this general aspect of the different fruits listed might be helpful to our understanding of them.

This morning I am also going to take you way back to our first sermon when we talked about how our Christian faith was in conflict with our flesh. In today's sermon, we are coming full-circle to the place where we started 10 weeks ago. Though we haven't talked about the concept every week, we've read these words every week since, and they state an important truth. There is a constant battle raging inside every single one of us. (Galatians 5:16-17) 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 do not do whatever you want. To repeat: 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 do not do whatever you want. Elsewhere Paul describes this horrible conflict in himself. Paul was one of the greatest missionaries of all time. He was one of the most devoted and educated Christians of all time. And this is what he said about himself. (Romans 7:15&19) I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. … I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. I would summarize this ongoing battle in this way: Our sinful flesh wants absolutely nothing to do with anything that the Holy Spirit

desires. And the Holy Spirit (the Lord) wants absolutely nothing to do with anything our sinful flesh desires. That being the case, it's no wonder there is such a battle raging inside us. I know you have experienced this battle. There have been times, many times, when you had to make a decision. Option 1 is incredibly tempting, exciting even. Option 2 is the wiser, more appropriate choice, but less attractive. Option 1, that's the sinful path that your sinful flesh was urging you to follow. Option 2 is the God-pleasing path that your faith knew you should take. And you have debated which path to go down. Sometimes you have chosen the faith path. Sometimes you have chosen the flesh path. And you know that these battles happen all the time. At least, they happen all the time in me. I'm quite confident they happen a lot in you as well.

All of which leads us to the final quality listed in the fruit of the Spirit, self-control. Very simply, self-control is the gift of the Holy Spirit that helps us say "No" to the things we should say no to, and "Yes" to the things we should say yes to. Which makes this gift extremely important! Because the more we go down paths our flesh wants to travel, the easier it is and the more likely it is that we will travel those paths more often. And the more often we travel those paths of the flesh, the more our faith takes a spiritual beating. In the same manner, the more we go down the paths the Holy Spirit wants us to travel the easier it is and the more likely it is that we will become a more frequent traveler on those good paths. Self-control is literally casting aside our fleshly desires, and grabbing firmly onto the things the Holy Spirit wants us to cling to. Solomon used this illustration to picture a lack of self-control. (Proverbs 25:28) Like a city whose walls are broken through is a person who lacks self-control. A city with broken walls isn't a good or safe city to be in, is it? In the same way, a person with no self-control is in for a lot of problems.

Unfortunately, we all lack self-control in some areas of our lives. And unfortunately, when it comes to decisions on what path we go down, too many times we have chosen the path our flesh was pushing instead of the path the Spirit wanted. We have often, too many times to count even, chosen the path of the flesh. Too many times we didn't even fight our flesh, but eagerly gave in! And again this Sunday morning, we have to acknowledge that we have frequently abandoned our Lord. We have disregarded his commands. We have ignored his wishes. We have turned our back on our God, and done what our sinful flesh wanted to do. And I ask you, since we have openly disobeyed our Lord's laws, what do we deserve from the Lord who is seated on the throne in heaven? When we have thumbed our nose at God, what should we expect from the holy Lord of Heaven and Earth? We should expect that supreme and glorious God to abandon us, to cast us away from him, to banish us from his holy presence, to punish us to the full extent of his holy law. We should expect to suffer in hell forever. That is rightfully what we should expect. But that is not what our God gives us. No, our God is far better to us than we ever have been to him.

Instead of casting us away from him, he came to dwell among us. He came to live in our world. He came to obey all the laws we have broken. But more than that! Our holy God came to endure our penalty. To suffer our punishment. To endure our pain. To die our death. And why? So that he could and would make full atonement for our every wrong. So that he would win complete forgiveness for our every sin. So that he would restore our broken relationship with God. So that he would transfer us from the path to hell to the path to heaven. Jesus our Savior conquered the enemies of sin, death and the devil. He won us a victory we didn't deserve to win, and we couldn't hope to win on our own. What a King!

What a Savior! What a Lord! And after he had died for us, and then risen back to life, and then ascended back to heaven where he came from, Jesus sent us the incredible gift of the Holy Spirit. God the Father gave us Jesus, and Jesus gave us the gift of the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit gave us God's Word. And the Holy Spirit gave us life, faith, through that Word. And the Holy Spirit gave us the fruit of the Spirit through our faith. The fruit of love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

And as we recognize that this horrific battle between our faith and our flesh is waging inside each of us. And as we realize that the Lord Jesus is coming back to this earth again sometime soon, this time not as a little baby but as the Lord of lords and the King of kings in judgement. Then the gift of self-control becomes exceedingly important. We want our decisions primarily being made by our Holy Spirit-given faith, instead of by our selfish sinful flesh. We want to be men and women, boys and girls, of superb self-control. It is good for God's people to excel in self-control while waiting to meet the Lord. As Jesus, the Lord, said himself regarding the Last Day. (Mark 13:32-33) "But about that day or hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Be on guard! Be alert! You do not know when that time will come."

Or to say it another way, as we wait for the sudden and unexpected return of Jesus, we want to be godly people excelling in self-control, following the Holy Spirit instead of the sinful flesh. It's fascinating what the Apostle Paul wrote to fellow pastor, Timothy, regarding the attitudes and actions of people in the End Times. As I read this, I want you to listen to the attitudes and actions of the flesh that will be present in the last days, and realize how opposite they are to the fruit of faith. Secondly, I want you to consider how common these traits are already in our world today. Here's what Paul says: (2 Timothy 3:1-5) But mark this: There will be terrible times in the last days. People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God … Have nothing to do with such people.

Did you catch what will be lacking in so many people in the last days? They will be lacking the characteristics of the fruit of the Spirit. Which means they are totally following their sinful flesh and its desires. In other words, they will be living completely differently than we have been discussing the past 10 weeks. And did you consider how common these attitudes and actions are in our world today? I think we would agree that they are already present and becoming ever more prevalent. A world filled with people following their flesh instead of faith will not be a pleasant place. And increasingly we are seeing these attitudes of the flesh prevail in our world today. Sadly, we saw it demonstrated in the most dramatic and traumatic way this week in Utah. And elsewhere in our nation as well. In fact, we are seeing it more and more in our increasingly secular, selfish world. Which is why Peter wrote what he wrote so beautifully in our Epistle reading for the day. (2 Peter 1:5-9) For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love.

Once again we hear many of the aspects of the fruit of the Spirit listed together. It's no accident the Holy Spirit inspired these characteristics to be repeated together over and over again in the Scriptures. They are important! They embody the way God's people live their lives. They embody the way God's people feel about God and act toward others. Peter continues (verses 8-9) 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. But whoever does not have them is nearsighted and blind, forgetting that they have been cleansed from their past sins.

Oh, how blessed we are to have THE gift of the Holy Spirit. That is, faith. And how blessed we are also to have the fruit of the Holy Spirit, which are the characteristics of faith, and which stand opposed to the characteristics of the flesh. Because the Lord Jesus is coming back one day. And he may very well be coming back soon. The Lord says this to the world. (Isaiah 45:22-24) "Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other. By myself I have sworn, my mouth has uttered in all integrity a word that will not be revoked: Before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear. They will say of me, 'In the LORD alone are deliverance and strength.' " All who have raged against him will come to him and be put to shame.

There is only one conclusion. There is only one possible outcome for all the people of this world. The Lord Jesus, the King of kings and the Lord of lords, will return. And when he does, everyone will be forced to acknowledge who he is. Many people, most people, will be forced to kneel before the Lord in terror. You and I, however, will kneel before him in love, joy, and peace. We will thank God for the forbearance he gave us to endure through the tough times. We will rejoice in the kindness, goodness, faithfulness, and gentleness our Lord showed us, and enabled us to show to others in our lives. And we will be thankful for the self-control God gave us to hold desperately onto him and his truths. On that day we will celebrate being dearly-loved people by our Lord and Savior. And we will celebrate being citizens of his heavenly kingdom forevermore. O, dear Lord Jesus, come quickly!