**Series: An Excellent harvest**

**Sermon: I Did It His Way**

Horace Mann whom we know as the man who made public education an important priority in America once wrote, *Habit is like a cable. We weave a thread of it every day and at last we cannot break it*.

We all have habits, woven one thread at a time. A habit is nothing more than a behavior pattern acquired and fixed by frequent repetition.

I was reading about what it takes to create a habit. Estimates range from it take 21 times repeating a behavior to become a habit to it takes 50 times. Nobody really knows and everybody’s different. Probably we can all agree that if you repeat something often enough it will become a habit.

         Coffee first thing in the morning…

         Using certain words when you’re angry…

         Going to church or not going to church

We can speak of good habits and bad habits.

Bad: yelling; leaving clothes on the floor; being late

Good: Saying “*I love you*”; putting your tools away; going to church

Once something becomes a habit it has a grip on you. Often it becomes master over you. Jesus recognized this when He said, *“I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin.”* John 8:34 Let me help you with the translation. The verb “sins” is actually ποιων ηαμαρτιαν – *Everyone who is doing sin*. If you do it and do it often enough it becomes a controlling habit.

We’re each responsible for our habits. Whether good or bad, we establish our own habits. You may feel like your bad habit controls you and you can’t do anything about it. You’re a slave to it. You’re right. An addiction is a habit firmly established.

As much as we’d like to avoid responsibility there are no acceptable excuses for our bad habits.

         *I can’t help it. I’m only human.*

         *Well, that happens to be my weakness*.

Habits, whether good or bad don’t just jump on us. We choose them. We create them. We establish them.

The key to overcoming bad habits and establishing good habits is self-control. The Fruit of the Spirit is self-control. The Greek word εγκρατεια is a construct of two words: “*in*“ plus “*sovereign*” or “*rule*”. It means to be sovereign or to rule over yourself. Socrates considered εγκρατεια a fundamental virtue.

Self-control is the ability to determine our behavior; to choose what we will do or not do, as opposed to acting out of instinct or emotion or personal desire.

Self-control is choosing what habits we will allow in our lives. We should choose our habits wisely because they will rule.

Self-control as a fruit of the Spirit is not one of the glamor fruits. Love and joy and peace are beautiful. They sound good and feel good. We understand and like them, but self-control? *Who really needs it? I’m a good person. I’m not an addict*.

Let’s see if we can develop a picture of self-control with a little scrutiny of some people who didn’t have it.

**Marcus Antonius Felix**, a friend of Claudius Caesar and a deft politician managed to procure for himself the position as Governor of Judea. By doing so he put himself in the Bible spotlight.

He was the kind of man who, if he wanted something he took it with little or no regard for other people. The Roman historian Tacitus wrote of him, *With savagery and lust he exercised the power of a king with the disposition of a slave*.

Then he crossed paths with Paul. He was governor when Paul was on trial. *Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was a Jewess. He sent for Paul and listened to him as he spoke about faith in Christ Jesus.* Acts 24:24 He didn’t know what he was in for.

Verse 25 tells us Paul…*discussed righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come.* I wish we had a transcript of his speech, but lacking a record of any specific statements, please allow me to tell you what **I** think he said based on what I know of Paul’s teaching in his letters.

First, I think he said, “*Righteousness is the essence of God. It’s what He is, what He does, and what He expects of us. Our relationship to Him is expected to operate on the basis of righteousness. We’re not puppets. We make choices. We choose our behavior.*”

Next, I think he said that righteousness is linked to self-control because the freedom to choose takes self-control in order to choose the way of God over the way of the world.

Finally, I think he told Felix that there will come a day of judgement about the choices he makes. *The Son of Man is going to come in His Father’s glory with His angels, and then He will reward each person according to what he has done.* Matthew 16:27

That’s not about earning a place in heaven. It’s about choices. Righteous choices reveal a heart in love with God. Unrighteous choices betray a man who thinks rather little of God. What we truly believe about God is born out in our behavior.

Felix had burned through three wives the last of which, Drusilla he stole from her first husband so it’s no surprise to me that when Felix heard this from Paul’s he…*was afraid and said, “That’s enough for now! You may leave. When I find it convenient, I will send for you.”* Verse 25

Felix was familiar with “The Way” as Christian faith was known. He wasn’t talking to Paul because he wanted to learn about salvation in Jesus. He was stringing Paul along…*hoping that Paul would offer him a bribe, so he sent for him frequently and talked with him.* Verse 26

He was interested in Jesus as long as Jesus didn’t make a difference in his lifestyle. He was interested in “The Way” as long as he could go his own way and not God’s way. The only self-control he showed was to choose his own way.

Self-control is an integral part of Christian faith because it governs our behavior and our behavior reveals our hearts, as it did for Felix.

Consider some very different people from Felix, **the religious leaders** of the Jews.

In Mathew 23 are recorded seven warnings against these men for the habits they established. These were very religious men who believed in God and who were supposed to teach worshipers how to connect with God.

They were like Chuck Swindoll, Beth Moore, Andy Stanley, all rolled into a politician. If you’ll excuse the alliteration:

Their pursuit of personal prosperity percolated into pedantic persiflage, providing palliation of the paucity of positive precis, projecting parturition, palter, poltroonery, and poseur. Their perspicacious panegyric punctuating a patois of piosity.

That’s just another way of saying “*They talked the talk but didn’t walk the walk*”. They used a lot of God-words and ideas but lacked the self-control to truly follow God. Their superficial disciplines merely covered up that although they honored Him with their lips their hearts were far from Him (Mark 7:6).

Self-control isn’t about doing the right rituals and ceremonies. It’s not about speaking fluent Christianese. It’s not about impressing people with our sanctimony. Self-control is getting our behavior to reflect a heart that is in love with God.

Listen to Jesus’ criticism of these “religious leaders”:

         *Everything they do is done for men to see*. Matthew 23:5

         They excuse their dishonesty. (16-18)

         They tithe the minutest of income but neglect justice and mercy and faithfulness. (23)

         They strain the tiniest particles out of their potables but swallow camels. (24)

Jesus didn’t discount the good things they did. His problem with them was that lacking self-control they indulged sinful behaviors and attitudes alone side the good things.

The issue for Felix was that he wanted to live his way, disregarding the righteous way of God. The problem for the religious leaders was that they wanted to look righteous, enjoying the accolades of admiring subjects, all the while serving themselves rather than serving God’s people.

Had Felix and the religious leaders exercised Godly self-control instead of being controlled by their personal desires they might have found themselves glorified in the New Testament writings instead of being vilified.

Peter wrote that things like The Fruit of the Spirit including in this case self-control are evidence of spiritual maturity. The purpose of The Fruit of the Spirit is to help us live differently from the world.

The Holy Spirit grows this fruit in us not to make feel good about our faith but so that we might escape the corruption of the world.

*His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and goodness. Through these He has given us His very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires.* 2 Peter 1:3f

If you remember, when Israel was about to enter the Promised Land God warned them about adopting the ways of the god-less people around them. Jesus followers in 2018 are likewise expected to eschew the sinful practices of our culture but rather be like Christ, or as Peter wrote, *participate in the divine nature.*

Peter went on, *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, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love.* 2 Peter 1:5-7

It’s one thing to have faith, that is to believe in Jesus, it’s quite another to live consistently like Jesus. So we’re encouraged to do whatever it takes to provide for ourselves things that enable us to be like Jesus. Among Peter’s list of positive qualities we’re able to acquire is self-control.

Peter wrote that God *has given us everything we need for life and godliness,* that is living like Jesus.Paul wrote that the Holy Spirit helps us add these things to our lives.

Peter wrote that…*if we possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep us from being ineffective and unproductive in our knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.* In other words, we will be good Christians.

Paul also wrote that we should apply self-control to be the kind of people that one day God will reward.

*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. 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 forever.* 1 Corinthians 9:24f

Strict training is εγκρατευομαι, the verb of self-control. An athlete self-controls to win a crown or medal. Jesus followers should self-control to win eternal life.

Paul did not suggest, nor do I, that we earn a way into Heaven with self-control. Paul did suggest, and I concur, that God expects us to apply self-control to lead Christ-like lives that God will one day reward.

Instead of acting on emotion or instinct or to serve our own personal desires we should self-control to align with God’s ways.

Self-control is integral to spiritual maturity. Self-control is a deep conviction and decision with the power of God to make righteous choices. It is a personal commitment to choose God’s way over the way of the world.

Now I’m going to offer four practical examples of where self-control can and should apply.

1.    Sexuality

Self-control is particularly appropriate here because sexuality is a precious gift that is easily and often abused for self-indulgence. Human sexuality is intended to help a husband and wife build their relationship, creating real oneness with the side benefit of bringing new life into the world.

Without self-control sexuality is often abused resulting in immorality, impurity, and debauchery. OK, we don’t used that word much in our vocabulary. How about this? Without self-control some people act like stray cats with no sense of shame.

If we don’t self-control we’ll probably be controlled either by emotion, or instinct, or personal desire. That often results in premarital sex, extra-marital sex, homosexual sex, and other forms of sex I’d rather not list.

Our culture excuses this behavior and condemns whoever speaks the truth, but it’s important to understand that the Bible is clear, those who so indulge their personal desires…*will not inherit the kingdom of God*. 1 Corinthians 9:6 I’ll leave it to you to interpret what that means.

2.    Rationality

Let me explain. Rationality is a marvelous quality God gave to people. It’s one of the qualities that make us unique among His earthly creations. It’s part of the “image of God” that we can think rationally to discern the difference between things.

Sometimes people fail to self-control their reasoning. For example we’ve all known people who, thinking rationally, know it’s not a sin to drink alcohol, but they abuse it to the point of alcoholism resulting in broken relationships, harming loved ones, even killing innocent families in DUI accidents.

The same can be true about thing drugs, or work, or play, or hunting – wait, you can’t do too much hunting, but the other things can be a problem. This isn’t legalism. I want you to see that almost anything can become a problem if we forget to think rationally. Don’t just “do” anything. Think about it. Use your rational thinking process to evaluate everything according to God’s ways.

3.    Property

We all own things. They’re the result of our labors; our skill and time and energy. More than that they are gifts from God. He gave us the ability to produce or create. The property we amass is given in trust from God.

People who lack self-control see property as theirs; gathered for themselves; to serve themselves. They use property to establish self-esteem, build confidence, and manipulate others.

With self-control we’re able to use property to bless others.

4.    Self-expression

We’re capable of a wide range of emotional responses to the happenings in our lives. Sometimes our self-expressions are harmful to other people, perhaps being abusive, hateful, derisive, or insulting. Self-expressions that are not self-controlled can result in broken families, destroyed friendships, demoralized individuals.

Self-control enables us to be sensitive. Not PC, but truly sensitive to how our self-expression affects someone else.

The Fruit of the Spirit is self-control whereby we choose to follow God’s way instead of behaving according to our emotions in a particular moment, or by instinct, or to satisfy our selfish desires.

The Fruit of the Spirit is not merely random good stuff. They are nine qualities that affect both ourselves and the people around us. God gives them to us but we have to act on them. That’s probably why self-control was last on the list.

Self-control can be defined as a personal commitment to choose God’s way over any other, especially our own, and that includes acquiring all of The Fruit of the Spirit.

Recently I heard one of the iconic songs of Frank Sinatra: “My Way”. I don’t think it’s a boast. I think it just says, “*Nobody determined my life. I did it my way*.”

         He has some regrets but he powered his way through

         He chose carefully along the way

         Sometimes he was almost overwhelmed

         He lived with ups and downs

But when all is said and done, however his life came out, he did it his own way. It’s a great song, one that he carefully guarded, only allowing it to be licensed for a movie two times.

It got me to thinking, what will I sing at the end of life? Will I sing about living life my way or will I sing that I did life God’s way?

Sadly too many people don’t want God’s way. They don’t want His guidance. They don’t want His salvation. They don’t want His gifts. They don’t want His Fruit.

Ben and I have preached this series not to make you smart. You’re already smart. We want you to understand The Fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Our prayer is that you’ll grow an excellent harvest of this fruit in your lives.

And at the end of your life you’ll sing not “*I did it my way*” but “*I did is His way*.”