

Self-Control in a time of Self Fulfillment
Matthew 16:21-27

It's good to be with you all this evening. If we have not met, my name is Walker, and I am on staff here at Citizens. If this is your first time visiting with us or first few times, welcome! We're glad you're here.

You're catching us on the tail end of a sermon series we have entitled "The Fruit of the Spirit in the time of the flesh." We've focused on the passage in Galatians 5 where Paul lists the fruit of the Spirit.

Gal. 5:22-23: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law."

We've looked at some of the tension between the fruit of the Spirit and the works of the flesh. We've looked at:

- 1) Love in a time of Selfishness
- 2) Joy in a time of Despair
- 3) Peace in a time of Anxiety
- 4) Patience in a time of Hurry
- 5) Kindness in a time of Bitterness
- 6) Goodness in a time of Brokenness
- 7) Faithfulness in a time of Compromise
- 8) Gentleness in a time of Harshness

And Tonight we are going to look at the last of the fruit listed in Gal. 5:

Self-Control in a time of Self-Fulfillment

We're going to spend our time looking at the passage Anna just read for us: Matthew 16:21-27, and see through, this jarring call to discipleship from Jesus, that the self-controlled life with Christ is better, richer, and more enticing than the self-fulfilled life of the flesh.

First, let's pray.

Self-Fulfillment

A few weeks ago, I was driving to pick up Tim from his house. I think we were going to lunch. I leave my house and started driving. Next thing I knew, I was pulling into the parking lot at my school. More than two miles and ten minutes away from Tim's house. Funny enough, There's a point in the drive where I could throw a rock and hit Tim's house.

Have this ever happened to you?

You get into the car and start driving, your mind wanders, and next thing you know you are somewhere other than where you set out to go.

In the moment, I laughed and told myself I was a doofus and headed back to Tim's house. What was convicting, though, was where my mind had gone in that car ride. My daydream took me to a snapshot of me and Sarah in a house, fenced in backyard, golden retriever, a couple kids, an office for me with wall-to-wall bookshelves. "Man, wouldn't my life be so peaceful if I could have those things? Wouldn't our life be better, richer, and more fulfilling if we had those things?"

This is my vision of the good life. If I have those things or become those things, I am complete. I am fulfilled.

We all have these kinds of thoughts. We all have some vision of the good life that we aspire to. It may be that you daydream about a certain role in a company that you know will bring status, money, and the PTO that will finally satisfy. Or it may be that your mind runs to the idea of a certain person, a certain spouse, that will finally be the thing that, to borrow from Tom Cruise, completes you. For others of us it's that our kids will be A students, stud athletes, and competitive college applicants. That's the good life. That's when I'll finally have peace. Some of us may even have sinful or dark places we go to when we daydream. The good life is the most pleasure I can have as quickly as I can get it.

Where do you go when you daydream? What is your vision of the good life?

Psychologists and theologians agree that humans are 'telic' creatures. This is their fancy way of saying that humans are directed towards a certain end. We are directed toward a goal or an ultimate aim that orients the way we live on a daily basis. Because I want something I will do whatever it takes to get that thing.

In our cultural moment, all of us are motivated by some version of the good life, yet this good life is more than likely some version of fleshly self-fulfillment. We are the masters of our fates, we are the captains of our souls. Our own self-fulfillment is the highest good we can pursue.

For our purposes, we'll define self-fulfillment as "carrying to fruition one's deepest desires or worthiest capacities to attain a satisfying and worthwhile life." **adapted from Alan Gerwith

A more common way of hearing this on a daily basis is 'follow your heart,' 'live your truth,' 'best life now.' All of these stem from the idea that your fulfillment or your happiness is your greatest aim. This is all over our culture today:

Think about how synonymous our identity is with what we do:

We find our self-fulfillment in our performance. Isn't this Charlotte in a nutshell? I work hard, and I am going to tell you about it. I got a promotion, and I am going to post it on social media. I went on this trip, and I am going to post pictures for you to see how fulfilling my life is.

We even do this with good and noble things. See this cause I support? Did you see my post about my community service?

In reality, there is a subtext to what we are saying. I will have a good life if I am recognized for the things I do. Don't I live a fulfilling life because I do these things or are passionate about these causes?

Or think about how readily we identify with the things we have:

My good life is in what I own. What neighborhood I live in. How instagrammable my house is. What logos are on my clothes. I will be fulfilled if I have these things.

It may even be our looks. We feel more fulfilled when we know we are the most attractive person in the room. When those looks fade or we don't look the way we should, we are unfulfilled.

Or think about how we find fulfillment in who we have:

If I can only have that person, then I will be fulfilled. As long as I have my family or my kids, I'll be ok. These are the kind of people who are crushed when they have a break up, not just hurt, but crushed.

Or maybe it's not just one person or a small group, but it's the opposite sex as a whole or all people. I am fulfilled if I am desirable in the eyes of other people. I am fulfilled if I am interesting enough to be sought out by other people.

This one is a bit more nuanced, but think about how we identify with our desires in our culture:

I am my passion. I need to do what I love or else I am wasting my life. I need to manifest my deepest desire on the surface of my life in order to be fully myself. This is what has happened with sexuality in our culture. We have to fully manifest who we are inside on the outside to be fully ourselves.

The core of self-fulfillment is this: This earthly life is all that matters. Therefore, I have to force my vision of the good life to happen or else what is the point of life?

Now, just so we're clear, it's not a one-for-one that self-control is directly opposed to self-fulfillment. In fact, in our culture we have a category for the practice of self-control. It may be unfair to say that self-control is opposed. We have a category for self-control. I will make sacrifices so far as they help me get where I want to go. I will have self-control in what I eat because I want to look a certain way. The reality is that we will make extraordinary sacrifices so long as our sacrifices help us get the good life.

Self-control

So, the category of self-control is there for us,

but the way the Bible defines self-control is different. When Paul says the fruit of the Spirit is self-control he doesn't mean is that we control of ourselves to get what we want, instead we subdue our desires in light of Jesus. "the power to subdue your desires in light of Jesus."

Notice the definition does not say we rid ourselves of our desires. It's the wrong reaction to our self-fulfillment and pursuit of our desires of the flesh to rid ourselves of any desire. Instead, it is that our desires are subdued. They are put in order. They are controlled.

This idea is conveyed in the word the original language – the power to have control over yourself. In other words, your desires are not running your life. Instead, you are running your desires. I want you to catch this also: the biblical idea of self-control carries the notion of power.

The Bible talks about how the athlete shows self-control to train to win. We can all marvel at the power of professional athlete, but what might be more impressive is the power of their self-control to follow their training programs.

The other place Scripture talks about self-control is with sexual sin. Those who have struggled with sexual sin or addiction know the power of the sin can only be mastered by a greater power of self-control. But it's not a power that somebody conjures up on their own. Self-control is a power that is gifted to us by the Spirit.

This biblical view of self-control confronts any remnant of our own self-fulfillment. The Bible shows us how our hearts are wicked, and how we are sinful more than we could imagine. Because of that, our self-fulfillment is curved inward so that we might attain our vision of the good life.

But the Bible makes us a better offer. The self-controlled life with Christ is better, richer, and more enticing than the self-fulfilled life of the flesh. Let's look again at Matthew 16:21-27 to see if that really is the case:

21 From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. 22 And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "Far be it from you, Lord!

This shall never happen to you.” 23 But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”

To situate ourselves in the story, Jesus has just come to His disciples to ask them who people say He is. They toss out a few ideas of what other people have said – you’re Elijah! You’re John the Baptist! – , but Jesus presses them. “Who do you say that I am?” Peter then goes star student on us and says, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Boom. 50 gold stars, Peter.

Peter’s confession is a turning point. Jesus’s impending death is on the horizon for the rest of the narrative. He sets His face for Jerusalem.

Peter and the rest of the disciples are beginning to understand who Jesus is. He is the Messiah. He is the promised One that the Scriptures foretold. He is the One who has come to bring salvation. Peter’s confession shows us their realization, but his confession is also what makes our passage tonight so jarring.

Talk about whiplash... Peter has just set the curve on the test, but now He is being called Satan. Jesus tries to prepare the disciples for what is to come, but Peter isn’t having it. He has the audacity to confront Jesus! He speaks in a way that implies he knows more about the Messiah than the man Himself! The pupil is trying to teach the master. Peter rebukes Jesus! That is wild!

Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you! God forbid that you experience such suffering! God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life, Jesus! One that does not involve suffering, self-denial, or self-control!

Jesus wheels around and puts Peter in his place. Get behind me, Satan! This is the same language we saw when Jesus confronts the devil in His wilderness temptations. It’s actually the same temptation. The devil tempted him with power without the suffering

You are a hindrance to me! You have set your mind on the things of man and not the things of God. Peter, you want self-fulfillment and not self-control. Peter, you want me to have the crown without the cross. This is the tension of our self-fulfillment and our self-control. Our flesh wants the crown, or our glory, without the cross, or our suffering. But the way of God recognizes that the crown only comes through the cross. Our glory with Christ only comes through our self-control with Christ.

The things of man vs. the things of God. Self-fulfillment of the flesh vs. self-control of the Spirit. This is at the core of this tension – will we live a life of self-fulfillment that seeks to give us what we want when we want, or a life of self-control, a life willing to suffer with Jesus because life with Jesus is better than a life of self-fulfillment. Jesus explains in the next four verses why a self-controlled life with Him is better, richer, and more enticing than the self-fulfilled life of the flesh. Look with me again at this:

24 Then Jesus told his disciples, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. 25 For whoever would save his life[g] will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. 26 For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? 27 For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done.

1) Your self-control is a gift in Christ

Jesus is held up in this passage as our consummate model for what self-control looks like. We talked about two weeks ago in faithfulness in a time of compromise the devil's temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. In our passage tonight, Peter is tempting Him with the same idea that He can get all that Father has promised without following the will of the Father. Hey Jesus, let's not do this pain and suffering thing. Let's just do the triumphant, conquering thing. Let's fulfill the conquering part of the prophecy while limiting the denying or controlling yourself. Tempting offer...

Jesus is not baited by Peter's offer. Jesus understands the Father's plan, and He willingly submits Himself to it. He willingly denies Himself. He denies His own self-fulfillment, perfectly exhibiting self-control, in order to follow the Father's plan.

He sets the pace. If you are to follow Jesus, He calls you to follow in His footsteps. Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow Him. Jesus has done it, and we are called to it.

Jesus denies Himself to the point where He willingly goes to the cross. Don't let that image sit lightly on you!. Human wisdom and our fleshly self-fulfillment would say this is nonsense. For our Savior to willingly go to the torture machine and willingly sacrifice His life is absurd. Why would He do that?

But Jesus trusted in the plan of the Father. Jesus's death, resurrection, and ascension are good news for us! They point to the truth that Christ has actually triumphed over sinful flesh! He, Himself, is our self-control. Without Christ, our flesh and our desires run rampant. Why would we say no? What do we have to control ourselves outside of our brute force? Without Christ, why would we not fulfill ourselves in every way?

But, In Christ, you walk in the newness of life. We've talked about both grace and grit throughout this series. This is the grace part. Jesus has conquered our flesh which means we not only are called to practice self-control, we also have the means by which we can practice it – in Jesus. The Holy Spirit has given you the power to subdue your own flesh. In Christ, self-control is not white-knuckling your life into submission. Instead, Jesus invites us into the power of self-control in and through the Spirit

Christ has given us the authority and the power of self-control to subdue our flesh and fleshly pursuit of self-fulfillment. This is the power we were talking about earlier. The power of self-control is found in the cross.

David Mathis says, "True self-control is not about bringing ourselves under our own control, but under the power of Christ."

In one of the scenes of Homer's famous epic *The Odyssey*, the main character – Odysseus – is travelling home on his ship after battle. He has been warned about the power of the song of the Sirens along the way who take the form of beautiful women and sing to seduce sailors over to them and to what will be their deaths on the rocks. Many well-intentioned sailors had been enchanted by the beautiful singing of the sirens. Odysseus takes this warning seriously. When the ship approaches the region of the sirens, Odysseus gives each of his men beeswax to plug their ears and orders they tie him to the mast of the ship.

As the ship approaches the island, the sirens sing to Odysseus. He hears the song, and his heart is captivated. He longs to jump into the water and swim over the sirens. The ropes dig into his arms as he strains. His men pull tighter and tighter and row faster and faster. Eventually, the ship sails out of earshot of the song, and Odysseus's sanity returns.

It took a power from outside Odysseus to restrain his flesh. Even though he was wary of the danger before the voyage, He needed his men to tie him and hold him in place. So it is with Jesus. We can be wary of our disposition towards self-fulfillment, yet we can easily succumb to it. Being found in Christ is the only power by which we can find true self-control.

When Jesus says to Peter, and to you, in this passage that to follow Him, you are to deny yourself, pick up your cross, and follow Him, He is drawing your gaze up. Something or someone outside of yourself has to give you the power to subdue yourself. That someone is Jesus. He has authority over the flesh, and your being found in Christ means that you, too, have authority over your flesh – not because you can drum up any power in yourself, but because Christ, Himself, is your power. Is this your view of Jesus?

So, when the inevitable tension arises between your self-fulfilling pursuit of the good life - pleasure, stability, riches, power - and your pursuit of Jesus, will you trust that Christ, Himself is the gift of self-control to you?

When you're gripped by the pull of temptation, the first step in fighting the pull to your own self-fulfillment is not to pull up your boot straps and faith harder, it's not about just summoning your own strength. Instead, it's about looking upward, gazing on Christ, asking Him for strength and power for you – only then will you be able to exhibit true self-control.

Now your self-control is a response of worship to Him.

2) Your self-control is your worship of Christ

Look again at the wording of verse 24: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.”

There is a sense here in Jesus’s words that your self-control will be the testament to Christ’s work in your life. He is saying that it is part-and-parcel to the life of a Christian that you exercise self-control.

Jesus puts this in front of us because it is evident that, based on Peter’s response, neither the disciples nor us want a Savior that requires something of us. Peter cannot fathom that the Messiah would have to be murdered, that His followers would suffer, or that He would ask hard things of us.

Might I suggest that we are not that different? We want Jesus but not too much of Jesus. We are ok with Jesus as our friend and as our Savior even! But when it comes to Jesus our Lord, that’s a different story. We want our vision of the good life, and Jesus exists to help us when it gets hard. He’s there to confirm and aid our advancements of our vision of what life should be. When we have to choose between our vision of the good life and the call of discipleship to Jesus, we get uncomfortable. We don’t want Jesus to call us to deny ourselves or to be self-controlled if we are going to follow Him.

Be honest with yourself for a second:

- If following Jesus means you might not achieve all you hoped you would in your career or your passion, do you choose earthly success or honoring Jesus?
- If following Jesus means you might not live in that neighborhood, buy that house, drive that car, or wear that brand, do you choose earthly pleasure or honoring Jesus?
- Or, on the flip side of that one, if following Jesus means you actually do move into that neighborhood, you do pursue that career, you do plant roots with your neighbors because that’s where Jesus is calling you, do you do it, or do you avoid the “boring” life? Maybe following Jesus means you don’t in some crazy place. Maybe following Jesus means you have to put down some roots here in the city and live unglamorously for the kingdom.
- If following Jesus means you have to control your lust or saying no to your sexual desire or identity, do you pick the temporary pleasure or honoring Jesus?
- If following Jesus means you have to die to a vision of the good life you have, do you choose the vision of self-fulfillment or honoring Jesus?

The way you live is telling of your vision for the good life. If somebody watched the way you lived, would they be convinced that you love Jesus?

Hear me when I say this, that these things in and of themselves are not bad. They become bad when they are part of visions of self-fulfillment that crowd out your love for Jesus.

They become bad when we treat Jesus like a prop in our one man play. He is just there to make us look good.

They become bad when we treat Jesus like a step for us to get to a higher level. He is just there to make us better.

They become bad when we treat Jesus like a vending machine. We only go to him when we want something from Him.

The call of Jesus is to come and die. It's to go all in - put all the chips on the table. It's to say, "every part of me is yours, Jesus. My dreams, my visions for my life, my identity, my community - it's all yours." You come first, not my own self-fulfillment.

Most of us would agree to this, but the tug of self-fulfillment is subtle. We make little compromises with our self-control. We think we are entitled to little sins because we have been so good for Jesus. But what we don't realize is that those little sins are serving a vision of the good life that is one of self-fulfillment. We indulge where we could be generous; we hoard where we could bless; we seek pleasure where we could deny ourselves. Proverbs talks about this slow fade:

Proverbs 24

33 A little sleep, a little slumber,
a little folding of the hands to rest,
34 and poverty will come upon you like a robber,
and want like an armed man.

These subtleties lead down a slippery slope. A chapter later, Proverbs captures that idea:

Proverbs 25

A man without self-control
is like a city broken into and left without walls.

We have already established the passive receiving of Christ that happens - this is the grace piece we have talked about all throughout this series. The self-control of Christ is a gracious gift to us. However, there is also a 'grit' piece of this. As a Christian, you have a role in pushing back your flesh to exhibit self-control

Exercising self-control found in Christ is part of your spiritual worship. As a disciple of Christ, you will look this way. Christians, because of Christ, should be those who best exhibit self-control to the rest of the world. Christians should also be the ones most hopeful of growing in self-control. Christians recognize this because we know that ultimately, the way up is down. To receive the crown, we must first embrace the cross.

This is what the athlete does. The athlete trains hard, the athlete controls what he eats, the athlete disciplines his body in a way so he can compete and win. But it is the process that makes the win possible. We, too, are called to the process. To the grit of daily self-control that subdues our desires, that pushes back our flesh, that submits to the way of Jesus. We do so because the way of Jesus is better.

3) Your self-control will bring fulfillment

Remembering this grit is important because your self-control matters. Look at what Jesus says in verse 27: "For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done."

What you do today matters! What you look at on the internet tonight matters! Where you compromise in following Jesus matter! You are practicing what you are going to do for the rest of your life! And there will be a reward coming for how you have spent your time. The crown comes after the cross. Your self-control matters if you want to fulfillment in the crown of righteousness at the end. Lucky for us, though, that fulfillment does not have to wait for the end, Jesus makes that offer now, as well:

See what he says in verse 25: "For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."

These are Jesus's words. Here them again: "For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."

Life is found with Christ. The fulfillment you are so desperate for is found fully and completely in Christ. There is no true fulfillment apart from Christ. There is no good life that does not involve submission to Christ that leads us to self-control

Those who try to hold onto their own visions self-fulfillment will never get the crown they desire. The person who dies with the most toys, the most money, or the coolest life doesn't win. The overarching theme of this passage is that self-control now in Christ, leads to fulfillment.

Those social media hashtags and self-help trends pale in comparison to the reward in Christ

Best life now? The best life is one so captured by the beauty of Christ, that it subdues the flesh
Live your truth? Jesus is THE truth. There is no higher. Because of that He can make demands of your life to deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow him with a self-controlled life.
Follow your heart? Jesus is the only thing that will reach to the depths of your heart and truly bring fulfillment.

The drum beat of this whole series has been that the fruit of the Spirit are found in Christ. Life in Christ is better than a life of the flesh. There is a sense that self-control in a time of self-fulfillment could be true of all the fruit we have talked about. The fulfillment we so desperately seek in the works of the flesh is found in Christ. He is the pearl of great price. He is the treasure hidden in a field that you sell everything to buy. He is the joy. He is the reward. He is the end all of our self-control because we get Christ! He is worth it.

We are not trying to white-knuckle our self-control. We are growing in our love of Christ.

Practice Guide.

Pray.

Communion

We are going to respond in a few different ways:

- 1) There will be people to pray with you in the back. If you feel like you need prayer or if the Spirit is doing something in you this evening, I would encourage you to go receive some prayer
- 2) We are going to stand and sing in worship.
- 3) We are going to take communion. This meal is a reminder of what Christ has done for you. That he denied Himself, took up His cross, and died for you, but He did not stay dead. He defeated satan, sin, and death to grant you eternal life. This meal is a family meal that is a reminder of that – the wafer reminds us that He was pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our sins and the juice reminds us that His innocent blood, the blood of the lamb, that covered our sins.