

The Fruit of Self-Control - The Spirit of Liberation

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We are to our last fruit of the Spirit - self-control: my least favorite fruit of the Spirit. This is because self-control requires us to follow rules and making sure we are doing things right. So when we hear self-control we freight it with a lot of things, in our culture and in our understanding. I want to suggest a reversal of how we think about self-control and our Scripture verses point to this reversal as well. My working premise for today is that, obviously, self-control is a gift of the Holy Spirit. But it is a work of the Holy Spirit because we have already been made free in God and Christ. So freedom precedes our self-control. Self-control does not lead to freedom. Self-control, in and of itself, does not and cannot lead to truth and freedom.

We see this in the Exodus story. God is giving freedom to His chosen people, the Hebrews, and God frees them from slavery in Egypt, sending them on their journey. The freedom precedes anything God tells them to do. We therefore read in Deuteronomy 6 a retelling of the Exodus story.

When the Jewish people gather together for Passover, they retell the Exodus story as if it were happening again. The story is told in such a way that *you* were freed from slavery in Egypt; God brought *you* out of Egypt. We hear then in Deuteronomy 6: *When your children ...*

In other words, why do we do what we do?

Luther took this phrase, *What does this mean?*, and created a catechism around this very question from this example.

The Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. The Lord freed us. That is why you are following these commandments. The freedom preceded the command to do these things.

The Lord displayed before our eyes... The Lord fought on your behalf.

He brought us out from there... The promise precedes the following the commandments. (5:30)

Then the Lord commanded us to observe... Once we are free, what do we do now that we are free?

In Christ, Paul says in Corinthians, *You are now free to do whatever you want, but not everything you do is beneficial.* In other words, we are free to think what we want, do what we want, be who we want to be, but thinking what we want, doing what we want and being whoever we want to be is not freedom. I am not sure exactly what to call this, but it is not freedom.

Relating freedom and self-control, rather than self-control leading to freedom, self-control becomes a witness to our freedom. We are meant to be witnesses. Jesus tells the disciples in Acts 1, *Go and be witnesses in Judea...*

What are we witnessing to? The freedom that Christ gives us. We are freed because of what Christ gives us; we are a liberated people in God. So we are called to be free for others and also bring them to freedom. God created us to be a free people. Right at the very beginning of Scripture, in the Garden, God says to Adam, *You may freely eat of any fruit of the garden...* Choices are already available to Adam and Eve in the Garden; freedom is already available in our very creation. Some go so far as to say that all of creation has an element of freedom in it, a certain free-will in every living thing.

We, in particular, though are the carriers of freedom for God. Kierkegaard talks about freedom and points out that we confuse the things we choose with our freedom. The best way I can explain this is, when you are standing in the grocery store and you are faced with 75 different kinds of cereal. I choose Capt'n Crunch over the healthy, whole wheat cereal. When faced with the choice, I am free to choose the Capt'n Crunch, but the thing I choose is not my freedom. Kierkegaard says that when we make that confusion, it is like we are standing over a huge chasm and all it does is create anxiety, this wealth of choices we have. Anxiety, then, is the framework of the modern mind because of all these choices we feel we have to make.

We think that the choices we make are what determine our freedom. Kierkegaard says, No, we have confused the thing you choose with your freedom. We have made a category error. What is actually your freedom is the *ability to choose*. Being able to choose at all is the nature of your freedom. The things outside of you are not determinative of your freedom; they are simply the outcome of what we are able to choose. So Kierkegaard says it is not choosing between good and evil that is important, although those choices have outcomes and this is where self-control comes in, but what is important is that you are *able to choose*.

Galatians 5:1 says, *In freedom, Christ has made you free*. Therefore, be free and be free with one another but do not *use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence but through love become slaves to one another*. Self-control, then, points us in the ways of love, the ways of Christ, in ways of living out further a more free existence. Because, when we are wondering what freedom looks like, freedom looks like God bringing Hebrew people out of slavery into freedom, like Jesus healing the sick, freeing the prisoners, feeding the hungry. If you want to know what freedom looks like, look to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. God is always seeking the freedom of God's people because that is what determines us - that is who we are. We are free people in God.

We are freed from things and we are free to things. We think we have just been freed from things. I am free from all these things, so now I can do whatever I want. But we are also freed to things. We are freed from the judgment of sin, the fear of death, the suffering of guilt - which comes from following all the rules because I believe self-control leads to freedom, the pressure to hate and the participation in hating groups of people, and we are freed from slavery. But we are also freed to things. We are free to love God and one another, to serve God and one another, to thrive in our lives and we are free to free others.

If others are not free, we also are not free. There is a very literal aspect to freedom in Christ and God. It is a material, spiritual and mental freedom we are talking about. God very much means that when you are free in Christ, it means you are completely free. If you are enslaved by debt, it means being out of debt. If you are enslaved literally, which, by the way, is true for more people now than at any other time in history - human trafficking, prostitution, debt slavery - God means for those who are enslaved to be literally free. Now, spiritual freedom is important in a situation like slavery, because that is how many people endure such a situation. Stories from the Holocaust show us that spiritual and mental freedom in God kept Jewish people, Romani people, homosexuals sane during that period of their imprisonment. Spiritual and mental freedom have great value. But true freedom means all aspects of our lives are free. It means material freedom, mental freedom, spiritual freedom.

Self-control then becomes very much about how we understand our discipleship. *The truth shall make you free.* We know our truth with God through our life and relationship with Jesus Christ. What, then, is freedom? It is our deepening relationship with God in Christ, because we were made to be free and living into that relationship creates even more freedom. Self-control, then, is not about following rules and nor is it a path to truth and freedom; what it is is a result of the freedom we have already been given by God and Christ. What it is is a living out of the presence of the Holy Spirit. We have the Holy Spirit *and then* we act on our self-control.

That doesn't mean if you don't have the Holy Spirit you shouldn't have some self-control, but what is important is what comes first. Our freedom in Christ and God comes first. God liberates us, Christ frees us and by the Holy Spirit, we are called to be that freedom for other people. 2nd John says, *Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father's Son, in truth and love. I was overjoyed to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as we have been commanded by the Father. But now, dear lady, I ask you, not as though I were writing you a new commandment, (in other words, there is something more than just the commandment that has been given) but one we have had from the beginning, let us love one another. And this is love, that we walk according to his commandments; this is the commandment just as you have heard it from the beginning—you must walk in it.*

And what is the commandment? That we love one another - that is our freedom in Christ. We are freed to love one another and we are freed from the things that keep us from loving one another. Amen.