Today we have reached the end. During our summer series called, “Life on the Vine”, we have been exploring how we as Christians can cultivate the Fruit of the Spirit in our lives. We have taken a look at them all: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and now finally, self-control. Before we jump in, there are a few ideas I want to review with you very quickly. The first thing we need to keep in mind is the primacy of love. Paul mentions it as the first fruit and we have seen that all of these others fruits are derived from love. And the main attribute of being loving is having a focus on God and others, love is other-directed. Kirkegaard, the famous Dutch philosopher affirms this notion. He says: “Truly to love oneself is to love God; truly to love another person is…to help the other person love God.” *Works of Love*, pg. 119

So we begin with love, something that focuses on others and we end with self-control something that places the focus on us. I mean there is not way around it. Self-control, self-disipline, willpower, fortitude self-mastery…whatever you want to call it….it seems out of place to round off this list of Spirit driven fruits with something so self focused. What is going on here? What is Paul trying say?

Maybe it’s a matter of translation. Paul wrote in Greek, and he uses the word *egkrateia* which could be translated “temperance” or “moderation” so indeed “self-control” seems to fit just as well. It’s important to note that through out the rest of the NT this word is not used very often. But, within the ancient Greek world, egkrateia was a highly valued virtue. Any Greek would include it on list of fruits that they would want their lives to produce, however, any Greek would have certainly put “Self-control” at the very top of their list. Xenophone, a star student od Socrates wrote, “Shall not every mon hold self-control (*egkrateia)* to be the foundation of all virtue, and first lay this foundation firmly in his soul? For who without this can learn any good or practice it worthily?”

Paul flips it all around. He begins with love, something other-directed, and ends his list with self-control. So he is acknowledging the virtuous aspects of controlling yourself, he is affirming what the larger culture believes, but he is attempting to transform the way in which people understand this virtue. For surely, if we can control ourselves in some way, what would we need the work of the Holy Spirit? SO it is clear, Paul is not advocating for **control of the self, by the self for the sake of the self, rather he is teaching control of the self by the Spirit for the sake of the Gospel.**

Our culture is similar to the Greeks in many ways. We value self-discipline. We admire sports figures who beat their bodies into shape and perform amazing feats. Everyone who sees a talented athlete also recognizes how much work they have put into what they do. They hit the gym every day, they spend x amount of hours on the court, they restrict themselves eat the appropriate diet they need to reach their goals. And I believe that is what makes self-control so valuable to us…it helps us reach our goals. Maybe I want to lose weight, or save money or pursue some dream…we all recognize how being self-controlled can help us reach those goals. It’s like the marshmallow test we conducted here this morning.

The real question is; what is your goal? For Paul, his goal would be to spread the message of the Gospel, to bring more and more people into a relationship with Jesus Christ. That is his goal, and he knows that no amount of self-control is gonna to help him meet that goal. He knows that he needs to die to himself and allow the Spirit of God to control him if he wants to even begin to touch that goal. Self-control, by the self for the sake of the self, is fine and good, but control of the self, by the Spirit for the sake of the Gospel is infinitely better.

Our culture, which values self-control, also paradoxically, lends itself to addiction. It can happen pretty easily because we believe and uphold that everyone has the right to pursue happiness. And what’s more each of us gets to decide what happiness looks like. And I think we might agree that for most people, happiness includes pleasure. So it is not a big step to becomes enslaved by our desires or pleasures so much so that before too long we are addicted. We are always chasing that high, that feeling, that pleasure that makes us happy. Many of you have been here at church when we have invited the MN Adult and Teen challenge Choir to come and perform. Each participant has a story about addiction and how their life was broken, destroyed because of it. But those broken people are presented with the Gospel. They are told about the love of God and the forgiveness found in Jesus Christ. They are loved and supported though their recovery, but what really get them through, what really transforms their lives, is not more tips or tools on how to deal with life or stave off temptation, what changes them is a new goal. They begin to understand that they cannot keep on living for their own sake Self-control, by the self for the d=sake of the self. They need to die to themselves, put away the desires of the flesh and learn control of the self, by the Spirit, for the sake of the Gospel.

Most of us here do not have such dramatic stories, but I am willing to bet, we all still deal with some form of addiction. We are all engaged in a battle with our flesh. Paul puts it this way in Romans 7:21-25….READ…

Notice here that Paul admits he is a slave, but he is torn…his mind belongs to God, but his body lives according to sin. But look at Chapter 8, the superscript holds the title “Set Free By the Spirit”. READ…

Think of it…The Holy Spirit lives within us, makes us sons of daughters of the living God, leads to life and this same Spirit works to develop the fruit of the Spirit in our lives. Not self-control, by the self for the sake of the self, but rather Control of the self, by the Spirit, for the sake of the Gospel. We admire world-class athletes, because they have beaten their body into shape and worked hard to meet their goals. What is our goal? Is it to shave some time off of our personal best? Or is it to share the life-giving message of a God who has done the impossible. A God who has called sinners his own sons and daughters.

If it is our goal to be used by God in the spreading of his Kingdom, to live our lives on the vine producing the fruit of the Spirit, there are a few things we could do to help the fight against our flesh… These steps are nothing new or inventive…I think that is how we know they are trustworthy. So as you might have guessed, as Christians, living in a culture surrounded by addiction, we need to be in God’s word and reading our Bibles. Every day, every day…get a hold of a reading plan, get someone to help you stick to it and hold you accountable…if you don’t know where to start go to the NT and start with the Gospels. Being in prayer will help us live in the Spirit and put away our selfish desires. But I want to add on more piece. Prayer and Scripture reading we always mention, as we should because they are so foundational, but when it comes to combatting addiction in our lives, we could all do with a little fasting. You see, most of the temptations we struggle with are not pure evil, rather they are a distortion on God’s good gifts. That is what Satan loves to do, to take good things from God and just twist them. For example, food is a good gift from God, but when we overeat and use food to do more than simply fill us when we are hungry, we twist it. Our eyesight is a good gift from God, but when we use our eyes to gratify our desires, we twist this good gift. The point is, temptations finds us in the everyday occurrences of life. Few of us will come across an abandoned satchel of money. So if we can do a little homework and pinpoint those areas in our lives that drag us into temptation we can begin to fast from these things. For me, I an tempt to watch too much TV. There is nothing wrong with sitting down to watch a show. Relaxing is a good gift from God, but I find that I can easily be tempted to remain relaxing and watch something else. Enter in fasting. Fasting is really just the practice of saying no. No I’m not going to flip on the TV tonight, not I am not going to go to Arby’s again, (oh, but I have coupons) No I am not going to raise my voice and yell at the kids again…even though they should have known better…I am saying no.

Saying no to those things that tempt us can be a great way to develop self-control but there is a danger. Saying no to something, does not guarantee that we will say yes to God. And that is the whole point of fasting, to say yes to God. We are not looking for Self-control, by the self for the sake of the self. We are looking for control of the self, by the Spirit, for the sake of the Gospel.

So if I say no, I am not going to watch TV tonight…I’m gonna grab my keys and head to Arby’s, I really have gained nothing. I need to turn off the TV and spend some time in prayer, I need to forego Arby’s and spend some time eating a peanut butter and jelly while reading some Scripture. I need to orient my life around the things that the Spirit is working in me. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and control of the self, by the Spirit for the sake of the Gospel.