

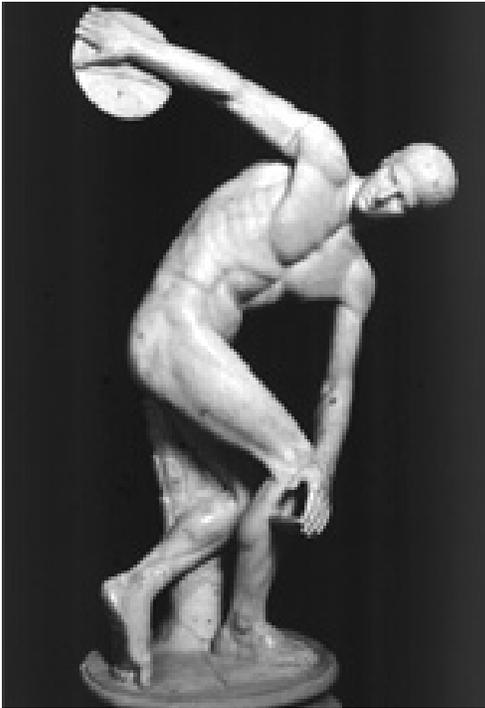
SELF-CONTROL



THE FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT IS LOVE, JOY, PEACE,
PATIENCE, KINDNESS, GENEROSITY, FAITHFULNESS,
GENTLENESS, AND SELF-CONTROL . . .

IF WE LIVE BY THE SPIRIT,
LET US ALSO BE GUIDED BY THE SPIRIT

GALATIANS 5: 22-25



For the Greeks, virtue could not be learned if one was continually overcome by one's passions and desires. Hence, the first and foundational virtue for all others was *egkrateia*, variously translated as temperance, continence, moderation, or most recently, self-control.

Philip Kenneson

And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.

Galatians 5:24



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SELF-CONTROL

“Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one.”
1 Corinthians 9:25

LIFE ON THE VINE

The Theme

Our culture is characterized by excess, addictions, and preoccupation with self and self-gratification. In contrast, Paul employs a popular Greek concept (self-control) to suggest that embodying the fruit of the Spirit means being guided by the other-directedness of the Spirit not the demands of the self.

The Word

- ◆ **DAY 1: Read Ephesians 4:17-31 (*putting away the former self*)**
According to Paul, what is it that we get rid of by putting away our “former way of life”? How does Paul’s image of “clothing ourselves” with a new self describe something different from the Greek idea of self-mastery [*egkrateia*]?
- ◆ **DAY 2: Read 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 (*image of the athlete*)**
What is Paul’s purpose in contrasting a runner’s disciplined exercise of self-control with running “aimlessly”?
- ◆ **DAY 3: Read 1 Peter 1-11 (*supporting faith with self-control*)**
Compare this passage with the passage from Titus and from Ephesians 4, looking for connections between the Holy Spirit, faith in Jesus and freedom from “various passions and pleasures.”
- ◆ **DAY 4: Read Titus 2:1-3:8 (*live lives that are self-controlled*)**
- ◆ **DAY 5: Read Chapter 10 in *Life On the Vine*** Pay particular attention to his summary of the position *egkrateia* held in Greek thought. After reading the chapter, work through the study guide on the following pages.

The Book

Although wisdom traditions have generally agreed that unconstrained passion and desire threaten human well-being, they have not always agreed about how best to address this threat. Buddhism recommends that unhealthy cravings be extinguished, often by means of meditation on the transitory character of all life. Other wisdom traditions have recommended the exercise of what we today commonly call “self-control.” However, we should be cautious here because this common English translation of the Greek word for this concept (*egkrateia*) is relatively recent and may actually lead us to miss (if not undermine) the radical challenge that Paul is mounting to the popular ethics of his day. . . . In an attempt to remind us of the problems of speaking about self-control, I have rendered Paul’s notion of *egkrateia* with a word that carries slightly less baggage: continence. By choosing a word that is not compounded with self, I hope to remind readers that even though Paul does employ the popular Greek concept of *egkrateia*, he effects a radical transformation of its meaning by suggesting that this new life in Christ is animated not by the demands of the self but by the other-directedness of the Spirit. ”

(Kenneson, pp. 223, 228)

The STUDY GUIDE

Exploring the Roots of Self-control

Consider this statement from Kenneson: “*Athletics seem to be one of the few areas in our society where we encourage and honor self-discipline and self-control*” (p. 223).

Who comes to mind as a recent exemplar of athletic self-discipline and self-control? (Lance Armstrong (cycling); Mia Hamm (soccer); Cal Ripkin, Jr. (baseball); Marion Jones (track); Pete Sampras (tennis); Annika Sorenstam or Tiger Woods (golf); Olympic champions such as are some examples.)

- ◆ What is it about these athletes that we admire? What characterizes the way they exercise control of mind and body?

Now consider: Who from the arena of athletics comes to mind as an exemplar of a lack of self-discipline and self-control?

- ◆ What is it about these athletes that we find so troubling? What features in our society impede the cultivation of self-control—even among those who strive for self-control in some part of their lives?

Our present-day notion of self-control (as expressed by athletes like Lance Armstrong) is essentially Greek in origin. According to Kenneson, what is meant by the notion is “something akin to control of the self, by the self, for the sake of the self” (p. 226). Paul and other New Testament writers, however, have something else in mind when speaking of self-control or of denying the flesh—they believe the power of Christ is what makes possible “control of the self by the Spirit for the sake of the gospel” (p. 227).

Examining the Challenges of Self-control

Character of the Fruit

Knesson points out that because the term, *egkrateia*, was commonly understood as “self-directed,” the Bible does not describe it in reference to God’s “other-directed” character. And yet each of the other eight fruits up to this point is presented as “other-directed” and reflective of God’s character.

- ◆ How do you understand the meaning of this fruit in Paul's list? How is its placement as last in the list suggestive of how Paul understood it?

Compare 2 Peter 1:1-11 and Galatians 5:16-26 and how Peter and Paul talk about self-control in the context of describing what the life of faith entails.

- ◆ How do you think Peter sees the virtue of self-control as supporting faith?

Paul's imperative, "Live by the Spirit . . ." (verse 16) implies some intentionality on our part in cultivating the fruit of self-control.

- ◆ What part does the Christian play in bearing this fruit of self-control? What part does the Holy Spirit play?

Paul's list of fruits of the Spirit is followed by the vivid declaration that the Christian has "crucified the flesh." Reflect on the Galatians 5:24 verse printed on the Participant Guide page 1, and the painting by El Greco.

- ◆ What does Paul's image of crucifixion contribute to our understanding of what self-control means for believers?

Obstacles to Bearing the Fruit

Recall these statements by Kenneson:

"While one billion people around the world each year suffer the effects of malnutrition, we live in a country where roughly three-fourths of our citizens are overweight."

"A life dedicated to the pursuit of pleasure (or its eradication) is by definition a life focused on self; it cannot therefore, at the same time, be a life focused on the other."

"Many of us are addicted to 'balance' or more precisely to mediocrity and lukewarmness. Too often we have used phrases like 'moderation in all things' to avoid the hard demands of the gospel."

- ◆ Think back to a time in your life when you were locked into some single-minded pursuit, or trapped in an addictive behavior pattern. How did that affect your relationship to God and other?
- ◆ When have you appealed to the maxim, "Moderation in all things," to soften or to avoid some of the hard words and radical demands of Jesus?

Bearing the Fruit of Self-control in the World

Kenneson suggests that the practice of worship and the exercise of prayer and fasting (meaning more than simply abstinence from food) are both ways to shape and reorient our lives toward God and neighbor. Good worship can help keep our passions and pleasure anchored in God rather than in ourselves. Similarly, saying a definitive “no” to self through abstaining from some appetite or activity may be the first step for some of us in saying, “yes” to God.

- ◆ Take time to think about how worship and fasting can help reorient your life under the control of God’s Spirit instead of the control of self.
- ◆ To what extent do you believe your life is other-directed, that is, focused on other people rather than on yourself?
 - List your current goals and aspirations. Be honest and list even those goals that may seem less noble, even self-serving.
 - After completing your list, consider how these goals and desires have been shaped by the powerful cultural practices we’ve discussed in this study.
 - Then evaluate the list you’ve made to determine whether your pursuit of your desires will foster or undermine God’s desire.