

10



SELF-CONTROL

LIFE ON THE VINE

PREPARE

As you read the Scriptures listed above, keep in mind that the Greek word *egkrateia* that Paul uses in Galatians 5, translated as self-control, appears only a few times in the New Testament (see Kenneson, p. 225). However, as Kenneson observes, there are a number of references throughout the New Testament to the problem of “our disordered affections and desires.”

As you read Chapter 10 of Kenneson’s book, pay particular attention to his summary of the position *egkrateia* held in Greek thought. Key to understanding this fruit of the Spirit is recognizing that Paul and the other New Testament writers considered this Greek idea of *egkrateia* a work of the Spirit not an exercise of self-mastery.

Read Ephesians 4:17-31, Titus 2:1-3:8, and 1 Peter 1:1-11, looking especially for connections between the Holy Spirit, faith in Jesus, and freedom from “various passions and pleasures.” Then read the Mark 4 and the 1 Corinthians 9 passages to compare present-day images of self-control with what Jesus and Paul meant by using images of a sower and a runner.

Invite a group member to supply the fruit to share. This week’s suggestion is plums. NOTE: You’ll also need a cluster of grapes for the welcome table for use during the closing.



Set up the room: Have the items ready for the welcome table as well as Bibles and copies of the participant guide for group members.

Have paper and pens or pencils on hand for one of the discussion activities. To close this lesson you’ll need hymnals or copies of the hymn “When I Survey the Wondrous Cross.”

PRAY

As part of your discipline of preparation this week, pray Psalm 26.

GATHERING AT THE TABLE OF SELF-CONTROL

In Advance

Prepare the welcome table by arranging the bowl(s) or tray(s) of fruit brought in to share. Open the Bible to Galatians 5 and place the white pillar candle or taper nearby. Be sure to have matches or a lighter handy for the person designated to light the candle.

As People Arrive

Greet everyone. Introduce newcomers and visitors to other class members. Keep in mind that bearing the fruit of the Spirit begins the moment the first person walks in the door.

To Open

Just prior to getting started, pass around the fruit so those who've arrived can enjoy it. Reserve a portion of the fruit as a display on the worship table. Once it's time to start, call attention to the worship table. Invite everyone to focus on the fruit on the table as you read aloud Galatians 5:22-23. Light (or have someone else light) the Christ candle on the worship table.

Conclude the gathering time with prayer, using Psalm 63:1-8 as the starting point.

EXPLORING THE ROOTS OF SELF-CONTROL

Begin with a brief discussion of self-control and self-discipline as expressed today through well-known athletes. Call attention to this statement from Kenyon: *Athletics seem to be one of the few areas in our society where we encourage and honor self-discipline and self-control* (p.223).

Think about who comes to mind as an 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 (golf). . . others?

- ◆ 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 addiction? Peter Rose (gambling) . . . Darryl Strawberry (drugs) . . . Jennifer Capriati (alcohol) . . . Mike Tyson (violence outside the ring)?

- ◆ 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?

Conclude this discussion by making the point that 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).

Now hear Ephesians 4:17-24 and 1 Corinthians 9:24-26 read aloud and discuss these questions:

- ◆ What does Paul’s contrast between the old life and the new life in Christ reveal about his understanding of self-control?
- ◆ How does Paul’s image of “clothing ourselves” with a new self describe something different from the Greek idea of self-mastery [*egkrateia*]?
- ◆ According to Paul, how is a Christian’s exercise of self-control like and unlike an athlete’s self-discipline?

EXAMINING THE FRUIT OF SELF-CONTROL

Character of the Fruit

Kenneson 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. Talk together about how 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?

Hear 2 Peter 1:1-11 read. Then hear Galatians 5:16-26 read. Compare how Paul and Peter 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.”

Call the group’s attention to the Galatians 5:24 verse printed on page 2 of the participant guide. Invite reflection on the verse while viewing the crucifixion painting by Velázquez.

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

Obstacles to Bearing the Fruit

Kenneson cites several obstacles to a life characterized by “control of the self by the Spirit.”

- our indulgence in addictive behaviors
- our tendency to be driven by the private pursuit of happiness for ourselves
- our presumption that we have within ourselves the capacity to control or discipline any desires or passions
- our uncritical application of the maxim, “moderation in all things,” to our deepest convictions—even to our faith

Use the following questions to guide discussion of these obstacles:

- ◆ Recall 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 witnessed someone attempt or when have you attempted to master some unhealthy passion? What was the result?
- ◆ 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

Then invite the group to respond to this statement from Kenneson: *“Living the Christian life faithfully in the United States will look suspiciously like fanaticism to a lot of people, including many Christians.”*

BEARING THE FRUIT OF SELF-CONTROL IN THE WORLD

Cultivating the Fruit

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.

Talk as a group about how worship and fasting can help reorient persons' lives under the control of God's Spirit instead of the self. Then invite the group to devote some time to reflecting on this question:

- ◆ To what extent do you believe your life is other-directed, that is, focused on other people rather than on yourself?

Allow time for reflection then provide paper and pencil and this instruction:

1. List your current goals and aspirations. Be honest and list even those goals that may seem less noble, even self-serving.
2. After completing your list, consider how these goals and desires have been shaped by the powerful cultural practices we've discussed in this study.
3. Then evaluate the list you've made to determine whether your pursuit of your desires will *foster* or *undermine* God's desire.

Form pairs to share insights resulting from this exercise. In particular, encourage pairs to talk about the areas of their lives where desires and passions may be disordered or misplaced.

CLOSING THE STUDY



Close your group time—and this whole study—by re-reading together Galatians 5:22-25. Covenant as a group to hold one another accountable in the coming weeks for cultivating Paul's fruits of the Spirit in their lives. Then form a circle and pass around the cluster of grapes from the welcome table. Ask each person to take and eat a grape and pass the cluster on, as a reminder of the focus of this study and as a sign of commitment to bear fruit as Jesus' disciples.

Sing the hymn "When I Survey the Wondrous Cross." End with prayer, using these words from 1 Peter 1:13-16:

"Therefore prepare your minds for action; discipline yourselves; set all your hope on the grace that Jesus Christ will bring you when he is revealed. Like obedient children, do not be conformed to the desires that you formerly had in ignorance. Instead, as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves . . ."