

The Fruit of Temperance

“That He may grant to you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with might through His Spirit in the inner man; that Christ may settle down in your hearts through faith, that you being rooted in love and having your foundation in love, may be completely able to lay hold of with all saints, what is the length and breadth and height and depth; and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Ephesians 3:16-19).

The last of the fruits of the Spirit is a word translated into English as “temperance” or “self control.” That is easy to say, but not so easy to understand and harder yet to achieve. There would not be many Christians that would claim to be always in control of themselves. Of course, the very term is highly relative. If the idea of self control, strictly speaking, is what is in view here, and if the absence or presence of self control is the measure of the presence of the Holy Spirit, we may all be in considerable difficulty. As paradoxical as it may seem, self control is probably one of the most common experiences of religions that totally lack the presence of the Holy Spirit. Whereas Jesus said that given the human condition, the denial of self (as the means of one’s own salvation) and the taking of the cross of Christ’s sacrifice instead, was necessary for following Him. The Pharisees were exemplary in their self control. They were highly disciplined. Paul said that as a Pharisee he was blameless in the keeping of the law. Jesus recognized that the Pharisees kept their laws so assiduously that they tithed even the seasonings that they put in their food. Perhaps the most outstanding example in the world, of complete self control, are the Hindu Fakirs, who perform incredible feats by such self control, even to suspended animation. But the most essential ingredient of identity with God is completely lacking—the inner presence of the Spirit of God. Without the Holy Spirit, no one can be identified with Him no matter how much self control one has. With the Holy Spirit one can be a member of the family of God even though self control as a human characteristic can be problematical.

But, someone says, “There it is in black and white—‘the fruit of the Spirit is self control.’” Yes, there it is in black and white—in the English translations—but what is it in the original Greek text? The Greek word here is *egkrateia*—inner strength. We go back to the Greek classics for the basic concept of the word. We find a most enlightening passage in the famous Greek myth, “Prometheus Bound,” by the early Greek dramatist, Aeschylus (1.55). As the legend goes, Prometheus was the one who discovered fire, which was regarded to be intruding upon the province of Zeus. As a punishment he was bound to a rock in the highest crags, to be battered by the elements. The project was in charge of one Hephaestus, who instructed his assistants—*Kratos* (power) and *Bia* (force)—to bind Prometheus in shackles that could not be broken. Hephaestus says to them, “Cast them [shackles] about his wrists and with might and strength smite with your hammer; rivet him to the rocks.” The word “might” here is the word used in Galatians 5:22 and has to do with that which belongs with one’s own native strength. Paul is telling the Galatians that the fruit of the Spirit is “inner strength.”

The question then is whence comes such strength for the Christian? The Bible

makes it very clear that our strength is more than a matter of natural self control. The passage we have quoted from Ephesians tells us that our inner strength comes through the Holy Spirit. The word “might” is the same one used in the story of Prometheus—(*kratos*). Through the Holy Spirit we are able to both comprehend and apprehend—to understand and lay hold of—the very strength of God within us. In fact, God Himself told Paul that His strength was made perfect in weakness. And Paul rejoiced in that and said to the Corinthians—“*When I am weak then am I strong.*” So then, it is not a matter of human strength or self control, but the strength of God within. As far as human resources are concerned, Paul has repeatedly indicated that he had no confidence whatsoever in the capacity of the flesh to function adequately or to satisfy God’s righteous requirements. Thus, to talk about human self control is to totally miss the message of the New Testament—that the very reason for the coming of Christ and His sacrifice was to make possible to human beings, locked in the prison house of fallen human nature, bereft of the Spirit of God, the restoration of oneness with God.

So what then is the effect of the presence of the Holy Spirit as regards the issue of inner strength? What are the evidences? What is the human responsibility and what is the responsibility of God? First of all, Ephesians 3 clearly tells us that this inner strength comes from or through the Holy Spirit, and that it gives us the capacity to grasp the dimensions of God on a four dimensional level. Breadth, length and height are three dimensional. Depth, as indicated here in Ephesians, is at the level of fourth dimension. Discussions of fourth dimension today involve us in mathematical formulae rather than observable or measurable phenomenon. Moreover, the presence of the Holy Spirit within us fills us with all the fullness of God. Obviously, the flesh is not filled with the fullness of God. Paul says, “*In my flesh there dwells no good thing.*” Once again we must point out that while our spirits are indeed filled with the fullness of God and possess His attributes, such attributes are not *ipso facto* or automatically expressed in our human behavior patterns. If salvation were contingent upon our consistency in human behavior, we would all be in a good deal of difficulty.

Once again, the evidence of the presence of the Holy Spirit within us is not flawless performance, but ceaseless caring about Christ—the incessant desire to have Him within us. That is why we care at all whether or not these various fruits of the Spirit are truly manifested within us. One would not even be reading this article except for the inner desire to identify with Christ and to please Him—a desire certainly not born of the flesh, but of the Spirit; a desire not nurtured by fleshly self control, but the power of the Holy Spirit within us.

But how far does the energy of the Holy Spirit extend in bringing about the modification of our behavior patterns so that we can please Christ. The reality is that while our spirits desire to do what is right and to please Christ, the flesh is not easy to control. Jesus Himself said, “*The Spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.*” The desire to do right is from the Holy Spirit. The ultimate expression of that desire in human behavior is sometimes difficult and is deeply affected by many factors beyond our control.

The fruit of the Spirit then is not fleshly piety or righteousness—Paul has already discounted that—nor is it flawless performance, nor is it a human capacity for self discipline and self control. Those things were common to

Pharisees of old and to religious zealots throughout the centuries. Almost every religion and sect in the world has its rules; many of them quite rigid and austere. Hundreds of millions of zealots engage in self discipline, because the requirements of their particular group demand it. But, of course, self discipline has no more to do with acceptance of Christ in the religious world today than it did in the time of the Pharisees, when He continually confronted them with their false piety and godlessness. The basic evidence of the Holy Spirit in our spirits is that we care to follow Christ and to be pleasing to Him, even though the flesh often finds it difficult to handle.

The fruit of the Spirit is inner strength. That inner strength is from the Holy Spirit and is what energizes us in persevering in our relationship to Christ, even though the flesh is a constant source of problems.

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