

Victory of the Lamb // July 7, 2019

Fueled // “Fueled for Self-Control” // Pastor Ben Sadler

We are continuing our sermon series called “**Fueled**”, looking at what it looks like when our lives are fueled by the Holy Spirit. And we have been focusing on an individual word from Galatians 5:22-23. **But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.** So far we have talked about love, joy, peace, forbearance (forgiveness), faithfulness. And now today we close out this series looking at self-control.

Self-control has been a personal, lifelong battle for me. You see, I was very overweight as a kid. I struggled to be self-controlled when it came to food. But that tendency bled into other areas of my life. I had a hard time being focused and meeting deadlines, especially when I was in high school and college.

This just happens to be the most difficult for me of all the virtues that we have studied. And I don't think I'm the only one. I think we all struggle with self-control at some level. I believe that today might be one of the hardest times in history to live a self-controlled life. A number of studies have shown that willpower seems to be a depleting resource, like any other form of energy. And there are a number of factors in our environment that are sap us of our self-control.

Let's consider a few of the factors that fight against your self-control. Let's talk about food. Almost everyone struggles with food. Why? Much of our current food has been designed to get us addicted to keep eating. Why can I eat a whole package of Oreos in one sitting? As Melissa Hartwig, writer of “The Whole30” put it: First of all, our brains love the novelty of contrast of sweet and creamy and crunchy. When I bite into one, a million pleasure sensors go firing. Not only are they lots of fun, but there is no nutritional value. So, as I eat, I never feel satisfied, just bloated.

Or just think about entertainment like Netflix or Youtube or Social Media. Cal Newport in his book “Digital Minimalism” talks about how both Netflix and YouTube have been designed to keep you watching. You have to use all your willpower to stop watching because now the videos and shows just automatically keep playing.

Or thinking about our spending. Dave Ramsey in his famous books like “The Total Money Makeover” talks about how the Credit Card companies have taken away the pain factor of over spending. When we go to make a purchase with our credit card and just swipe our card, our brains don't register that we are actually spending money.

Or just think about how we spend our time, Michael Hyatt in his book “Free to Focus” talks about how social media like Facebook and Instagram are in the business of robbing us of our time by distracting us. We are tempted to take the time to light up our red notifications button, instead of doing the deep work that we are called to do.

I'm not saying food companies, credit card companies, or social media networks are evil. They are just in business to keep you as their customer. So they want to keep you addicted to spending your time and money using their products. They are experts at pushing your pain and pleasure buttons to keep you addicted what they are offering.

So what are we supposed to do? Well, here is a stack of books that I've read on this topic of self-control. And I've read many more. And I've seen some progress in many of some areas of my life. Have you read

any books and blogs and articles on self-control? Have you tried to make some significant changes in your life? Yet, after all this time I still struggle with self-control. Why is that? What is this such a deep and troubling issue for me and so many others?

I think 1967 Lay's potato chip ad brings it out well in an ad which displays a tree, a snake, and Eve contemplating eating a potato chip.

They are trying to sell chips. But they make my point. They compare food with the Garden of Eden and Eve's spiritual decision to eat from the tree. These decisions we make are not just emotional, they are spiritual. Just like Eve ate from the tree so that she "could be like god" we run, even worship things like food, Facebook, finances, and our phone because we have a spiritual problem.

Our problem is not just with our habits. It's with our hearts. It's not just with our food and finances. It's with our faith. So if we are going to get anywhere with self-control, we need to go deeper. We need to fix our hearts. We need to deal with self-control in our souls.

So here is the question I want to answer today: **How can we begin to experience true self-control?**

To answer that question, I want to turn to Paul's letter to Titus. This is a short letter in the Bible. Paul, the great missionary, wrote a letter to his apprentice, Titus. The main purpose of the letter was to get Titus to go back to the island of Crete. Crete is a little island off of the coast of Greece. The reason that Paul was so concerned about the Christian church in Crete is because the Cretan culture had no self-control what-so-ever.

Crete had the reputation similar to Las Vegas, you know "Sin-city", what happens in Vegas stays in Vegas. If you were an ancient Roman you might say something like, "What happens in Crete stays in Crete." Paul even quotes one of the Cretan poets. **One of Crete's own prophets has said it: "Cretans are always liars, evil brutes, lazy gluttons."** (Titus 1:12) Paul is just saying, "Even your own poets admit that this island is known for its lack of discipline and self-control.

Paul's concern was that this crazy, hedonistic, toga-party culture was spilling over into the church. So he goes on to say, **This saying is true. Therefore rebuke them sharply, so that they will be sound in the faith...They claim to know God, but by their actions they deny him. They are detestable, disobedient and unfit for doing anything good.** (Titus 1:13,16) So although there was a Christian church in Crete, the lives of the Christians were just as undisciplined and detestable as the rest of the culture. They were taking the good gifts of God like money and food and pleasure, and indulging in these things to the extreme. So much so that good things became bad things.

Now let's do some personal inventory. Food, money, pleasure, entertainment are not evil. Those are all gifts of God. But when we overindulged, food, money, and pleasure become our functional god. When we lose self-control these good things become idols.

So what does Paul do to help the Cretan Christians practice self-control? He tells Titus to preach the good news of Jesus. He says, **For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people.** (Titus 2:11) Paul preaches the grace of God. And we are used to hearing about the grace of God. And if you have been here for any amount of time, you would hear more about the grace of God that brings you salvation from your sins and eternal life.

But Paul goes on **For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age...** (Titus 2:12) We might already know that message of Jesus is good news that saves us from sin, but what we probably don't know is that it teaches us something.

Here is the first fill-in-the-blank.

1. The grace of God **teaches** us self-control.

If you want to be self-controlled, you need more than just good advice from all the leading experts of the day. You need good news. You need the grace of God in Jesus Christ. The grace of Jesus will teach you *self-control*.

How does this actually happen? How does hearing about Jesus and worshiping Jesus and knowing Jesus teach me to be self-controlled?

Paul goes on, **(He) gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.** (Titus 2:14)

Redeem is slave language. To redeem means to buy a slaves freedom. When a person finally paid off their debt they were no longer a slave. They were a free person. When Jesus poured out his blood, he bought your freedom. You are no longer enslaved by sin anymore.

So often we go back into destructive patterns because of guilt. Run to food, money, mindless entertainment because we are looking for a release or a distraction from our guilt. And it becomes this never-cycle where we continue to be trapped by guilt and they we run to our favorite vice to give us release from that vice. But the good news of Jesus has broken the chains of our guilt and shame. He as bought our freedom.

It makes me think of a devotion from Sally-Lloyd Jones book that went like this:

During the Civil War era in our country there was a Northerner who bought a young slave girl at a slave auction. As they left the auction, the man says to her, “You’re free!”

In amazement she looks at him and says, “You mean I’m free to do whatever I want?” “‘Yes,’ he said.” “And to say whatever I want to say?” “Yes, anything.” “And to be whatever I want to be?” “Why yes indeed!” And to go wherever I want to go?” “Yes, of course! You’re free to go wherever you’d like!” And she looked at him intently and replied, “Then I will go with you¹.”

The grace of God teaches us self-control because the grace of God gives us a new owner. We are not owned by our sin anymore. We are redeemed. We have been set free.

We are not only set free from past sin. Let's look at that verse one more time: **(He) gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.** (Titus 2:14)

¹ Story titled “Freed!” found on page 118 in a delightfully written and illustrated little book called “Thoughts to Make Your Heart Sing” by Sally Lloyd-Jones. Published by Zondervan, 2012.

Jesus has not only purchased our freedom, but he also cleaning us up. He is purifying us. This is a life-long battle of facing the areas where we have lost self-control and facing them with God's help. God's grace continues to purify us.

I think the best example of this are the first three steps of Alcoholics Anonymous:

1. **We admitted we were powerless over _____—that our lives had become unmanageable.**
2. **Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.**
3. **Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.**

Whatever area of our lives that we are struggling with, we must admit, "I am powerless on my own to overcome my problem." Then we look to a greater power. We would say, we look to the power of the Holy Spirit, God who lives in us. Then we commit to relying not on our own strength but in the strength that the Holy Spirit provides.

You see, the problem of self-control is much deeper than just bad habits. These are heart issues. AA gets that. They have all sorts of resources and books and information. They have accountability and habit training. But they also realize that we need a new heart.

So, it is good to read all these books. It's good to get lots of good advice. But you and I need to go deeper. We need to go to the roots of our issues. So here is the final take away point.

2. **Work on your heart as much as you work on your habits.**

How do you do that? Preach the gospel to your heart. Let message of Jesus dwell in you richly. Be filled by the love of God. Let the Holy Spirit convince you that you are forgiven child of God. Read the Bible as much as your read any other self-help book. Let God the Holy Spirit change you from the inside out. Don't be shackled by guilt and shame. That will only send you back to destructive habits. You will be tempted to medicate your guilt with food, Facebook, finances and your phone. Keep coming to church. Keep taking the Lord's Supper. Keep being encouraged by God the Holy Spirit.

I shouldn't be surprised that self-control has been a lifelong battle for me. That's how it is going to be for everyone. We are all a work in progress. We are all broken and God is in the business of putting us back together again. But one day he will return to finish the job.

Paul says, "Keep working on our self-control...**while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ...** (Titus 2:13). Paul is reminding us that Jesus is going to return. And when Jesus returns he is going to renew everything. He is going to renew our world. He is going to renew our bodies. He is going to renew our self-control. He is going to make us into the people we always longed to be.

I want to close out this sermon and this whole series with this idea. We all want more love, joy, peace, patience, faithfulness, and self-control. We all want more of the things that we have talked about in this series. Everybody does. So let's be open to all the help that we can get. Let's me open new information, books, blogs, friends. BUT let's realize these are all qualities and virtues that describe God.

God is love.

God is joy.

God is peace.

God is patient.

God is self-controlled.

And he gives us these gifts as we are fueled by the Holy Spirit.

So instead of looking to our own strength. Let us be fueled, fueled by the Holy Spirit. Amen.