

Self-control

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance: against such there is no law.

Self-control or temperance is the fruit we're going to look at today. What is self-control? Why is it important? Why is it a fruit of the Spirit? Is it something that God has or evidences?

What are the fruits of the Spirit? These are nine (3x3) fruits produced by the Spirit in every believer. They are, in general, the reproduction of the life of God in the soul of the individual. Love, joy and peace are the elements of the life of God. God is love! God is joy! God is peace! These are three elements and one thing – the one fruit of the Spirit. God exercises longsuffering, gentleness and goodness. His revelation of Himself in the gospel is His glory and this is the reproduction of the life of God in the soul of the individual. When the individual begins to believe the gospel, then the reproduction is taking place. The fruit called gentleness is the expression of the gospel. Faithfulness and meekness are aspects of the life of God that control how we deliver the message of the gospel. But this brings us to the fruit of self-control or temperance. Is it even an aspect of the life of God in the soul of the believer? I mean, is it an aspect of the life of God at all? Clearly God avoids all sin when He acts and while not being tempted by sin yet He conducts Himself in a way that satisfies this requirement.

That is one question we will have to deal with as we proceed. Is the life of self-control an aspect of God's life or is it the case that the Spirit enables us to avoid the worst sins of the flesh and conform to the image of the Spirit.

The word is ἐγκράτεια and it is derived from the words EN + KRATEI. It is properly equivalent to ὁ ἐν κράτει ὢν, *strong, robust*. Properly speaking it is being strong and robust in the face of sin, when sin presents itself, when the strength of sin presents itself, ἐγκράτεια chooses to do right, to do well.

The temperate man is marked by abstinence from certain desires of men, the temperate man does not commit adultery nor gratify one's lust. The temperate man does not engage in the works of the flesh listed by Paul,

Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are [these]; Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told [you] in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God. (Gal 5:19-21)

The man of self-control is opposed to these actions and determines himself to a better way, the way of love, joy, peace, etc. He does not commit adultery, does not engage in idolatry, etc., because he is filled with goodness, righteousness and truth and the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness and righteousness and truth (Eph 5:9).

Classical Understanding

The classical understanding is probably best given by Aristotle who in his Nicomachean Ethics wrote that

Now, since some pleasures are necessary while others are not, and are necessary up to a point while the excesses of them are not, nor the deficiencies, and this is equally true of appetites and pains, the man who pursues the excesses of things pleasant, or pursues to excess necessary objects, and does so by choice, for their own sake and not at all for the sake of any result distinct from them, is self-indulgent; for such a man is of necessity unlikely to repent, and therefore incurable, since a man who cannot repent cannot be cured. The man who is deficient in his pursuit of them is the opposite of self-indulgent; the man who is intermediate is temperate. (Aristotle. Aristotle: The Complete Works, p. 1081).

The idea of temperance is placed not opposite of self-indulgence but contrary to it as intermediate in the sense of pursuing some pleasure to a point that does not exceed the bounds of what is good. The opposite of self-indulgent is someone who is too much opposed to pleasure, someone who derives his pleasure as it were from doing what was opposite of pleasure. It is the man who is intermediate in pleasure was the man who was temperate. We can see the viability of this from a human perspective – there has to be an intermediate between living life for pleasure entirely and living life for the opposite of pleasure entirely – the truth is thought to be somewhere in the middle. There are two lives which are separated from the life of reasonability and so the truth must be somewhere in between.

The intermediate way that Aristotle proposes here is temperance – the wending between the two extremes of too much pleasure or too little pleasure. Our temperance is a matter of living right and avoiding the things of the self-indulgent person and the opposite. The natural man, evidenced by the Nicomachean Ethics, cannot achieve the balance necessary to be a temperate person. The natural man naturally desires to violate the moral law – either too much or too little. There is a command to love the Lord our God and to love our neighbor as ourselves and yet we are naturally possessed by a self-love which overtakes all others. That is why it is a fruit of the Spirit. It is a natural feature of an ethic but is quite impossible to achieve apart from grace.

Biblical view

24 And after certain days, when Felix came with his wife Drusilla, which was a Jewess, he sent for Paul, and heard him concerning the faith in Christ. 25 And as he reasoned of righteousness, temperance, and judgment to come, Felix trembled, and answered, Go thy way for this time; when I have a convenient season, I will call for thee. (Acts 24:25)

Paul stood before Felix and preached to him of the demands of righteousness and the need of temperance for the coming judgment. Felix was afraid because Paul preached the law to him.

What was it that Paul preached? He preached about the need for righteousness and the temperance that was required. Righteousness we understand but what about temperance? Why would Paul preach that to this man? Felix and his third wife, Drusilla, who was Jewish, sent for Paul and listened to him speak. Drusilla, according to the historians, was supposed to be a raving beauty. When she was still only sixteen, Felix, with the help (it is said) of a Cypriot magician called Atomos, persuaded her to leave her husband and come to be his wife, promising her (with a play on his name) every "felicity" if she did so. So their relationship was immoral from the beginning.

Here is Paul, a prisoner who is innocent of the false charges against him, coming before the man who had the power to release him or execute him. Maybe he should present the Gospel in a user-friendly fashion, showing them how Jesus could help them have a happier life. He could bring out his best stories to warm their hearts, and maybe Felix would even let Paul out of prison.

If you were Paul, and you were summoned to Felix, a Roman governor, and his wife, a Jewess, and were asked about your message, what would you have said?

When asked to expound the truth about "the faith of Jesus Christ," Paul did not dampen his message down so as not to cause offence. He knew the facts about Felix and about his wife. He knew them for what they were. Felix possibly expected an interesting discourse on the resurrection, but he got more than he bargained for. Paul didn't give Felix and Drusilla an inspiring message that left them feeling good about themselves. He rather gave them a message which highlighted the requirements of the law: righteousness and self-control.

But if they cannot contain, let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn. (1 Cor 7:9)

The idea of containing or continence is the idea of ἐγκρατεύομαι. If they cannot contain places the idea of continence front and center in the life of the believer. It is the idea of self-control in the face of a contrary desire which is not necessarily sinful but is contrary to the gospel. If they can contain, ἐγκρατεύομαι, then let them continue in that state. But marriage is honourable in all; but it is a duty in those who cannot contain nor conquer those inclinations. It is those inclinations which lead to marriage because they cannot be supported. Though marriage is quite difficult yet it is the only course for those who cannot contain or who do not have continence. If they cannot have continence, let them marry: for it is better to marry than to burn.

And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things. Now they [do it] to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible. (1 Cor 9:25)

Paul's conception of ἐγκρατεύομαι is that which is necessary to strive for mastery. While in 1 Cor 7:9 he gave it a strictly asexual interpretation such that those who have temperance are wholly given to Christ for His service and have no room nor time for themselves. Everyone who strives, every one accustomed to contend, i.e. every professional athlete naturally is temperate in all things. The word includes all kinds of contests, whether in running, wrestling or fighting. Is temperate in all things, i.e. controls himself as to all things. He exercises self-denial in diet, in bodily indulgences, and by painful and protracted discipline. The ancient writers abound in rules of abstinence and exercise, to be observed by competitors in preparation for the games. They indeed for a corruptible crown, we for an incorruptible. If the heathen submitted to such severe discipline to gain a wreath of olive or garland of pine leaves, shall not Christians do as much for a crown of righteousness which fades not away? (Hodge, Charles. 1 & 2 Corinthians, p. 203).

Those that ran in their games were kept to a set diet: *Every man that strives for the mastery is temperate in all things*. The fighters and wrestlers in your exercises are kept to strict diet and discipline; nay, they keep themselves to it. They do not indulge themselves, but restrain themselves from the food they eat and so from the liberties they use on other occasions. And should not Christians much more abridge themselves of their liberty, for so glorious an end as winning the race, and obtaining the prize

set before them? They used a very spare diet, and course food, and denied themselves much, to prepare for their race and combat; so do I; so should you, after my example. Thus says the Apostle Paul.

7 For a bishop must be blameless, as the steward of God; not self-willed, not soon angry, not given to wine, no striker, not given to filthy lucre; 8 But a lover of hospitality, a lover of good men, sober, just, holy, temperate; 9 Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers. (Titus 1:7-10)

These are the qualifications for a bishop – an elder – in the church to be sober, just, holy and temperate. Here we say that a bishop is to be a

lover of hospitality -- needed especially in those days. Christians travelling from one place to another were received and forwarded on their journey by their brethren.

lover of good men--*Greek*, "a lover of (all that is) good," men or things

sober--towards *one's self*; "discreet"; "self-restrained"

just--towards men.

holy--towards *God*

temperate--"One having his passions, tongue, hand and eyes, at command" [CHRYSOSTOM]; "continent."

You see what intensity of virtue he required. "Not given to filthy lucre," that is, showing great contempt for money. "A lover of hospitality, a lover of good men, sober, just, holy"; he means, giving away all his substance to them that need. "Temperate"; he speaks not here of one who fasts, but of one who commands his passions, his tongue, his hands, his eyes. For this is temperance, to be drawn aside by no passion but to continue in the way of the Lord.

5 And beside this, giving all diligence, add to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; 6 And to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; 7 And to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity. (2 Peter 1:5-7)

Peter describes the sevenfold route to charity which goes a separate way from the nine fruits of the Spirit. Peter's sevenfold way begins with virtue and ends with charity and includes temperance along the way. Their *faith* (answering to "knowledge of Him," 2 Pe 1:3) is presupposed as the gift of God and is not required to be ministered by us; in its exercise, virtue is to be, rather, ministered. Each grace being assumed, becomes the stepping-stone to the succeeding grace: and the latter in turn qualifies and completes the former. *Faith* leads the band; *love* brings up the rear. Temperance is right in the middle.

The growing awareness of divine standards leads to the exercise of self-control. Left to themselves, human beings are not strong enough to discipline their passions but are liable to give in to evil desires (as Peter will soon point out: 2:10–12; 3:3). For Christians, self-control comes about through submission to their more powerful Master, Jesus Christ. (Hillyer, Norman. 1 & 2 Peter, Jude (Understanding the Bible Commentary Series): 16, p. 165)

In a retrograde order, he who has *love* will exercise *brotherly kindness*; he who has *brotherly kindness* will feel *godliness* needful; the *godly* will mix nothing stoical with his *patience*; to the patient, *temperance* is easy; the temperate weighs things well, and so has *knowledge*; knowledge guards against sudden impulse carrying away its *virtue*.

‘Self-control’ (1:6) — “self-discipline” — is temperance on Peter’s list. The false teachers Peter warns against later lack self-control; they are slaves of their passions and corruption (2:2, 10, 14, 18–19). Nisbet states, “a Christian that would grow must labor to have, by the power of God’s grace in him, such a command over his passions of anger, fear ... and especially in the use of sensual delights, that he may be able to keep them within the bounds which ... the rules of God’s word prescribes.”[66] Growing in self-control preserves us from many sins against God and our neighbors, enabling us to harness our passions for good. (VanDoodewaard, William. *Welwyn Commentary 1 & 2 Peter: Feed My Sheep* (Welwyn Commentaries), pp. 190-191)

Application

It is interesting that ἐγκράτεια is a fruit of the Spirit. That being the case, we know that we cannot acquire it apart from grace. What we can do by nature is carry out the works of the flesh which are these: Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, 20 Idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, reveling, and such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God. (Gal 5:19-21). These works of the flesh are the same that are generated by the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience (Eph 2:2) and among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; (Eph 2:3). It is the nature of the flesh and the nature of the spirit that works in the flesh that it does not act in accordance with ἐγκράτεια – self-control.

It is the Spirit of Life who brings self-control into possibility. For what is done is done for the glory of God and not for men. That which is done for men will necessarily involve some aspect of the flesh – adultery, ..., reveling, etc. It is the flesh that profits nothing and by the flesh that we operate before we are born again. Being born again we have a new nature which is of God and seeks God. This new nature sets ἐγκράτεια – self-control, temperance, continence – to a high value and therefore sets it before the individual.

While the word is only slightly used, the idea is rather more noteworthy, because as the idea goes, temperate weighs things well, and so has knowledge. He has the fear of the Lord:

And unto man he said, Behold, the fear of the Lord, that [is] wisdom; and to depart from evil [is] understanding. (Job 28:28) The fear of the LORD [is] the beginning of wisdom: a good understanding have all they that do [his commandments]: his praise endureth for ever. (Psalm 110:10) The fear of the LORD [is] the beginning of knowledge: [but] fools despise wisdom and instruction. The fear of the LORD [is] the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy [is] understanding. (Prov 1:7; 9:10)

In general, the weight of temperance goes with the knowledge of God. For with the revelation of God comes the desire to live right, to turn away from evil, the many evil things of Galatian 5:19-21). The fear

of the Lord produces right living – through wisdom. It is wisdom that turns a man from following wickedness to following righteousness. It is fear that is the beginning of knowledge and it is the application of knowledge which keeps a man from sin.

If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him. But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed. For let not that man think that he shall receive any thing of the Lord. (James 1:5-7)

The man who seeks after wisdom, wanting faith, he has nothing to receive with; faith is the grace, which receives the Lord Jesus Christ himself, and all graces from him; which receives a justifying righteousness, pardon of sin, adoption of children, and even the everlasting inheritance, at least, the right unto it; wherefore those who have not faith, as the wavering man, cannot receive any thing. But the man who has faith will come and ask the Lord for wisdom and it will be granted to him. The wisdom thus given will result in the way in which one is walking to be godly. But the wisdom by which one walks according to the temperate way of self-control is from God. It is not from men, from the world, from anything other than from God. And God will give it – but it is necessary to ask Him, to come to Him, to seek Him. They want wisdom to observe the sovereignty of God in them, and bow unto it, and be still, and know that he is God, who does all things well and wisely; and likewise to see and know that all are in love, and in very faithfulness, and for good; as well as to see his name, to hear his rod, and him that has appointed it, his voice in it, his mind and meaning, and what he designs by it; as likewise to learn the useful lessons under it, and particularly to take the cross well, to bear it patiently.

Who [is] a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? let him shew out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom. 14 But if ye have bitter envying and strife in your hearts, glory not, and lie not against the truth. 15 This wisdom descendeth not from above, but [is] earthly, sensual, devilish. 16 For where envying and strife [is], there [is] confusion and every evil work. 17 But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be intreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality, and without hypocrisy. (James 3:13-17)

This passage nicely sum up the full picture. The man who is endued with knowledge and wisdom is the man who is able to show out of a good conversation, his works with meekness of wisdom. That is the form of godliness that we are talking about. It is the fruit of the Spirit – just as much as love, joy, peace – but is self-control, temperance. This is first of all seen as living through wisdom – where there is a wisdom from God, there is then a way which is not the way of the world but the way of life through the world.

The wisdom which is from above has God for its author; it is infused into the soul by the Spirit of God; and leads into the knowledge of things that are above, of heavenly things; and which only is true wisdom and knowledge; and those who are possessed of it are the only true. It is pure in itself, it is free from everything that is earthly, carnal, or sensual, or devilish; it produces purity of heart, of life, and conversation; and is the means of keeping persons pure and chaste, and free from impure lusts, lusts of uncleanness, pride, envy, wrath, &c. which prevail in carnal and unregenerate men:

It inclines and engages those who have it to live in peace with the saints, and even with all men; with those of their own household, with their neighbors, yes, even with their enemies: it is also "gentle"; or

makes men gentle, moderate, and humane, so as that they bear, and forbear; they bear with the infirmities of the weak; readily forgive injuries done them; do not rigidly exact what is their due, but recede from their just right for the sake of peace and love; and do not bear hard upon others for their failings, but cover them with the mantle of love. Of compassion and beneficence to the poor; feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the widows and fatherless in their affliction; and doing all other good works and duties, both with respect to God and man, as fruits of grace, and of the Spirit.

Conclusion

The question was asked at the beginning, whether it was the nature of God which was brought forth in the soul of the believer. The fruit of Spirit is reproduction of the life of God in the soul of the believer. But could self-control or temperance be the life of God? In the sense that it is keeping from the works of the flesh outlined in Galatians 5:19-21, there is a perfect keeping of the Lord God from evil. He is not tempted to evil but is holy in all His ways. Thus the Spirit of the Lord produces ἐγκράτεια in us as we study the law, acquire the wisdom, and trust in Him to lead us in the opposite direction. It is the life of God in us that leads us along the paths of righteousness and away from the sin outlines in Galatians 5:19-20.

We do indeed have powerful drives and passions that need to be kept under control. But since some of our passions are part of our fallen, sinful nature, how can they be controlled? We do not have the ability in ourselves to do so successfully in our own strength. We can try to exercise self-control, in the same way that Aristotle commended us to cultivate it as a virtue. But Aristotle did not consider the nature of sin. Are you in control of what is perhaps the hardest thing of all to exercise self-control over—your tongue? Paul does not list that specifically here (though it would be involved in discord and dissensions), but he would certainly have agreed with the way James stressed the damage the tongue can do and the need to control it severely. [Wright, Christopher J. H.. Cultivating the Fruit of the Spirit, p. 160]

With regard to the word ἐγκράτεια there is a threefold distinction to be made. In 1 Cor 9:25, Paul expresses functional self-discipline that stands in the service of a greater good. He uses the figure of athletic victory to stand for apostolic evangelism and says that if self-discipline stands in the way of that, how much more it should be in the way to a greater glory?

Second, the Greek and Hellenistic idea of virtue is expressed in Acts 24:25, Gal 5:23, Titus 1:8, 2 Peter 1:5-7. Paul preaches to Felix and includes ἐγκράτεια in the fruit of the Spirit and the qualities that an elder must show. Peter includes it among the seven on the way from faith to love.

Finally, the reference to ἐγκράτεια in the various passages indicates that it is a supernatural effect. Luke speaks concerning the faith in Christ before speaking of righteousness and temperance and the judgment to come. In Gal 5:23, it is the fruit of the Spirit that is ἐγκράτεια. It is not an ordinary or normal thing experienced by men. Peter makes faith a gift of God. As those who have obtained like precious faith as a gift then add virtue, knowledge and temperance to it – temperance operates upon the gift of faith.