

*<sup>6</sup>For this reason I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you through the laying on of my hands; <sup>7</sup>for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline. <sup>8</sup>Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God, <sup>9</sup>who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace. This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, <sup>10</sup>but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. <sup>11</sup>For this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher, <sup>12</sup>and for this reason I suffer as I do. But I am not ashamed, for I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him. <sup>13</sup>Hold to the standard of sound teaching that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. <sup>14</sup>Guard the good treasure entrusted to you, with the help of the Holy Spirit living in us. (2 Timothy 1:6-14)*

Over the past seven weeks, we have been looking at the “marks” of discipleship – the attitudes, thoughts, disciplines, and deeds that are visible in a person who is following Christ as a **disciple** – as one who seeks to draw closer to Jesus in order to learn from him, emulate him, and try their best to love and serve as he loved and served. We come today to the final mark in our series: self-control. I put it last because it also comes last in the list of spiritual characteristics that Paul gives us in his letter to the Galatians, where the apostle tells us that *“the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”* *“There is no law against such things.”* Paul writes, *“and those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.”<sup>1</sup>*

And that is what we are talking about, aren’t we, when we talk about self-control? Reining in the passions and desires of our flesh, keeping our wits about us and our emotions in check. If we are trying to reach a destination or achieve a goal, we have to stay focused. We have to avoid temptations that could pull us off the straight and narrow path. We have to resist unwanted behaviors that cloud our vision or weaken our spirit. We will likely have to defer gratification, controlling our use of resources, lest we run out of what we need before we reach our objective. As the great Roman statesman and philosopher Cicero once said, *“The enemy is within the gates; it is with our own luxury, our own folly, our own criminality that we have to contend.”<sup>2</sup>* Self-control tames that enemy within our gates, and helps us serve the better angels of our nature.

I think that’s why Paul put self-control last on his list. I think he listed it last because he realized that all of the good fruits of the Spirit, all the gifts that bless us and the world when we are truly seeking God (love, joy, peace, patience...) all of that good stuff can veer off course and crash into the ditch if we do not also have enough self-control to keep it

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<sup>1</sup> Galatians 5:22-24.

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/marcus\\_tullius\\_cicero\\_390379](https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/marcus_tullius_cicero_390379)

together when the road gets bumpy and the going gets tough. A momentary lapse of judgment... an undisciplined surrender to emotion or temptation... just one exchange when we fail to keep our cool before lashing out... and we can lose our way and fall short of the good goals we have set for ourselves.

I love the way that the 19<sup>th</sup> century Scottish preacher Alexander MacLaren talks about our need for self-control. In that day and time, Scottish preachers didn't hold back, especially when it came to human depravity. "Look at us," he said. "We have only to look at ourselves and see how there are in us a whole clamorous mob of desires, like nine-days' kittens, with their eyes shut and their mouths open, yelping for their sustenance." Now kittens are cute, but Maclaren wasn't talking about the cute part – he was talking about the parts that didn't have a clue about the world – they are blind, their eyes are not yet open, they can't move around hardly at all, and all they care about is eating... eating... and eating some more. A "clamorous mob of desires."

And then he said, there is another part of us – the voice in each of us that says, "Thou shalt, thou shalt not; thou oughtest, thou oughtest not." "We need only... look at ourselves," MacLaren wrote, "to know that [we are] meant to coerce and keep well down under hatches all these blind propensions and desires, and to set sovereign above them a will that cannot be bribed, a reason that will not be deceived, and a conscience that will be true to God." And he concluded with this, "Govern yourselves, or you will come all to pieces."<sup>3</sup>

Now that will preach. Isn't that it in a nutshell? God blesses us in so many ways, but at the end of the day, we have to hold it together. We have to control ourselves, we have to keep our impulses and emotions in check, we have to govern ourselves -- or we will go to pieces.

I have always thought that one of the most miraculous things about Jesus Christ, and the time when the height of his awesome power was on fullest display, was the way that he held it all together at the end of his life. His arrest was indefensible from a legal perspective. His trial was a sham, a railroad job in anyone's book. Put before the crowd, the people who should have defended him, people who had once hailed him in adoration, now cruelly abandoned him. One disciple had betrayed him; another publicly denied him three times. And then came the taunting, the spitting, the beating, the flogging, being made to carry his own cross to Golgotha... then having the nails driven into his hands and his feet... having the crushing weight of his body slowly squeeze the breath and life out of him... the sour mocking taste of the vinegar in his mouth... the pain of the spear in his side. And not once did he cry out. Not once did he yelp in pain, or shout in anger and resentment.

Instead, he fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah who had foretold that "*He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not grow faint or be crushed until he has established justice in the earth...*" I will say here that I just do not understand it. If that happened to me, I would have gone to pieces from the very beginning. But not Christ. He is THE model, THE exemplar, THE eternal epitome of self-control.

That is the image that Timothy's mentor wanted to impart in this letter we have read today. Timothy was a third generation Christian. Like his mother and grandmother before him, he was known for his piety and faith. A prominent and respected leader, he had accompanied Paul on many of his missionary journeys. But as time passed he seemed to be

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<sup>3</sup> [https://biblehub.com/commentaries/2\\_timothy/1-7.htm](https://biblehub.com/commentaries/2_timothy/1-7.htm)

losing some steam. He was getting tired, and we all know what happens when we get tired - we make mistakes. It's like we are driving late at night, It's been a long day but we still have a long way to go. Our eyes are getting heavy, and we might not realize how fast we are going... we might miss a sign... or a turn... or even worse, we might just close our eyes for just a second... As a Christian leader, Timothy was getting tired.

Or, to use the language of this letter, the flame of his faith was flickering out and growing dim. This letter comes from a mentor and friend of Timothy – perhaps Paul, perhaps another leader in the church. But the gist of the advice Timothy is getting from his teacher is this: *“I remind you to rekindle the gift of God that is within you ... for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline.”* This teacher is urging Timothy to rekindle the fire of his faith, because God did not lift Timothy up and bless him just so he could fall apart. “Get the fire going again,” the letter says, “because God is giving you power... God is giving you strength to love and serve... and God has given you the capacity to control yourself – so you can keep it together and keep moving forward. And the same is true for you and for me.

Whenever I think of the miraculous self-control that Jesus showed, whenever I am reminded of our calling to be smart and prudent and thoughtful in the lives that we offer to Christ, I recall that famous poem by Rudyard Kipling, that I am sure you have also heard:

*If you can keep your head when all about you  
are losing theirs and blaming it on you,  
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,  
But make allowance for their doubting too;  
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,  
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,  
Or being hated, don't give way to hating,  
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise: . . .  
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew  
To serve your turn long after they are gone,  
And so hold on when there is nothing in you  
Except the Will which says to them: 'Hold on!' . . .  
If you can fill the unforgiving minute  
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,  
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,  
And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!*

Yes, I wish Kipling had used more inclusive gender language in his closing line, but I think all of us can relate to his message.

If our faith is lacking, if the fires of our commitment to follow Christ and honor Christ and be disciples of Christ are growing dim, then let us pray that those fires might be rekindled... let us remember that God does not impart a spirit of cowardice, but a spirit of love and power... and as we welcome the good fruits of the Spirit that will surely come, let us also govern ourselves thoughtfully and with courage, or we will surely fall to pieces.

**Amen.**