This morning, I am in the ninth week of a sermon series that I've entitled "The Spirit-Formed Life." During this series, I will be looking at what is known as the fruit of the Spirit, a phrase Paul uses in Galatians 5:22 to describe the kind of character that is formed in the person who lives under the influence of the Holy Spirit, walking not according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit of God. In case you're unfamiliar with the concept of the fruit of the Spirit, it comes from Paul's words in Galatians 5:

Galatians 5:22-23 - But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, [23] gentleness and self-control.

This, Paul says, is what the Spirit produces in the life of the person who walks in step with God's Holy Spirit. People marked by love, not hatred, hostility or indifference. Joy, not despair or cheap thrill-seeking. Peace, not anxiety or conflict. Forbearance or patience, not anger, irritability, or impatience. Kindness instead of meanness, callousness or cruelty. Goodness instead of selfishness, corruption, or perpetrating evil. Faithfulness instead of faithlessness, unreliability, or a lack of integrity. Gentleness instead of harshness, abusiveness, or aggression. And self-control instead of living a chaotic, out of control life enslaved to desires. And Paul tells us that these qualities will be ours in increasing measure as we learn to walk with the Holy Spirit of God and to yield ourselves in obedience to His fruit-producing work in our lives. That is the Spirit-formed life.

This morning, we will be looking at the ninth and final characteristics on the list: self-control. We will answer three questions: what is self-control? Why is self-control so important? How do we become more self-controlled?

1) **What is self-control?**

Self-control is the governing of one's desires. Let me share three different definitions. As pastor and theologian David Mathis put it, "Self-control is simply that important, impressive, and nearly impossible practice of learning to maintain control of the beast of one's own sinful passions." Or, as Tim Keller put it, "Self-control is the ability to consistently recognize and choose the important thing over the urgent thing." Or, put it this way: Jerry Bridges defines self-control as the exercise of inner strength under the direction of sound judgment that enables us to do, think, and say the things that are pleasing to God. In Bridges' definition, sound judgment enables us to determine what we should do and how we should respond, and inner strength provides the will to do it.

What is self-control? Self-control is eating healthy food instead of choosing to please your taste buds with something you know will be bad for you. It is restraining your anger and choosing to stay quiet or say something that will lead to a better outcome. It is reserving your sexual energy for your spouse instead of gratifying yourself through other means. It is saving your money and being generous instead of spending it all on yourself buying things you don't need or gambling it away. Self-control is the ability to get your work done instead of being distracted by your phone, by social media, or by mindless entertainment. And most importantly, it is having the resolve and strength to do what will please God instead of what you want to do. It is having this mindset:

1 Corinthians 10:31 - So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God.

2) **Why is self-control so important?**

There is a great passage in 2 Peter about all that God has given to us and our responsibility in availing ourselves of what He has offered to us:

2 Peter 1:3-7 - His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. [4] Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature and escape the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. [5] For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; [6] and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; [7] and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love.

Notice how self-control comes after knowledge on this list. Why is self-control so important? You can know the right thing to do, you can know the wise way to live, but without self-control, you will often choose the wrong thing to do, the foolish way to live. If you want to be wise, you will need self-control, self-discipline.

The writer of Proverbs puts it like this:

Proverbs 25:28 - Like a city whose walls are broken through is a person who lacks self-control.

The person who lacks self-control is like a city with broken walls, with no defense against temptation or the enemy. When your desires are out of control, if you can

not control your drinking or your emotions or the words you speak, you are vulnerable to attack, to the forces of chaos in your life.

There are many areas of our lives where a lack of self-control can destroy us, so let me give a number of examples. Consider which of these you relate to. For instance, you know the most important thing is to **stay sober** and stay in control of your faculties, but you can't stop yourself from escaping into drinking or doing drugs when you are stressed or out with friends. You know that you want to **be faithful** to your spouse or your future spouse, but you give in to the urge to look at pornography, flirt with people to whom you are not married, or get involved physically with people to whom you are not married. You know that if you're going to **be healthy**, you need to eat healthy food, but you find yourself going for a pint of Ben & Jerry's at 2 in the afternoon. You know how important your **relationships** are, yet you can't stop venting your anger and hurting those you love. You know how important it is to do a **good job at work**, but you can not control your time and end up wasting away half your day on the Internet, on the phone, or in meaningless activities. You know how important it is to **listen and learn**, but you can't control your attention with anyone. You know how important it is to **live at peace and trust God**, but you can not control your anxious thoughts. You know how important it is to **save money**, but every time you see something you like, you have to buy it, or you find yourself gambling away more than you want to. You want to **live for God**, but you are continually distracted by social media, games, videos, and countless other things on your phone.

The hard truth is that your lack of self-control is destroying your life and your relationships. As James put it:

James 1:13–15 - When tempted, no one should say, "God is tempting me." For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; [14] but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. [15] Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.

The truth is that many of us know the right thing to do, but we lack the self-control to choose it consistently. We end up echoing Paul's words in Romans 7:

Romans 7:15–25 - I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. [16] And if I do what I do not want to do, I agree that the law is good. [17] As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. [18] For I know that good itself does not dwell in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I

have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. [19] For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. [20] Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. [21] So I find this law at work: Although I want to do good, evil is right there with me. [22] For in my inner being I delight in God's law; [23] but I see another law at work in me, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within me. [24] What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death? [25] Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!

Thank God for Jesus' death for our sins and our lack of self-control. But even though we know we are saved by God's grace and not by our works, we still long for greater self-control in our lives. So how do we increase self-control? Let me give three answers:

How do we grow in self-control?

1) **Expose your idols for the false gods they are and repent of them, fasting if we can**

Proverbs 18:10–11 - The name of the Lord is a fortified tower; the righteous run to it and are safe. [11] The wealth of the rich is their fortified city; they imagine it a wall too high to scale.

What a Proverb. God's name, His character, is a strong tower, a place of security and safety we can run into to protect us in the stress of life. We will look more at that in point number three in a few minutes. The second verse mentions how the rich imagine their wealth to be a fortified city, a place that will protect them from suffering and the stress of life. But it's all in their imagination. It's not real. Their money is a false god that can not protect them from death or cancer or accidents or mental illness or relational strife. And the same is true for whatever is causing your lack of self-control – alcohol, pornography, shopping, gambling, work, gaming, videos, social media. Where do you instinctively run when you are stressed, or depressed, or bored, thinking it will fill you up and deliver you from whatever is oppressing you? Wherever it is that you are turning, it is a false god. It will not give you what you are looking for. And the more you turn to this false god, the more addicted you become and the more you suffer.

As Cornelius Plantinga wrote, "No matter how they start, addictions operate like this: addictions begin when we use something we believe will relieve distress.

Then eventually the addictions create their own distress. And finally, addicts spiral down when they try to cure the additional pain with the thing that caused it."

Think of The Little Prince when he encountered the man who was drinking: "Why are you drinking?" the little prince asked. "To forget," replied the drunkard. "To forget what?" inquired the little prince, who was already feeling sorry for him. "To forget that I'm ashamed," confessed the drunkard, hanging his head. "What are you ashamed of?" inquired the little prince, who wanted to help. "Of drinking!" concluded the drunkard, withdrawing into silence for good.

You imagine your idol to be a fortified city, but it is not. You feel bad about yourself, so you gossip and slander and tear others down, but doing this doesn't give you the value and self-esteem you are looking for, but only destroys your relationships. You turn to food to numb the pain and feel good, but after the temporary pleasure wears off, you feel worse about yourself. You turn to pornography, or gambling, or social media, or shopping, or online games, or videos, or anything else to numb out or find some pleasure in this world, but in the end, it only makes things worse. You run to your addiction, imagining it a fortified city, a wall too high for your troubles to scale. But instead, you find that you are like a city with broken down walls, and there is no refuge in your addiction from the pain of life.

You want self-control? Expose your idols for what they are. They are not working! Confess your sin – agree with God about their usefulness – and repent of them. There is a reason that the recovery movement's twelve steps begins with admitting that we are powerless over our addiction. Be ruthless if you have to. Remember how Jesus put it?

Matthew 5:29–30 - If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. [30] And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

This is not meant to be taken literally, but are strong words of Jesus about the insidious power of sin and just how ruthless we have to be in mortifying – putting to death – those things which seek to kill us. As John Owen said, "Be killing sin, or sin will be killing you."

Proverbs 18:10–11 - The name of the Lord is a fortified tower; the righteous run to it and are safe. [11] The wealth of the rich is their fortified city; they imagine it a wall too high to scale.

Run to God when there is an attack or a threat instead of to your idols. Turn to Him in prayer instead of to drinking or shopping or worrying or yelling or sleeping or whatever it is you imagine to be your strong tower. The name of the Lord is His character, His nature. Remind yourself of who He is. Remember that His love is enough.

Remember how Jesus handled temptation in the wilderness:

Matthew 4:3–11 - The tempter came to him and said, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread." [4] Jesus answered, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.'" [5] Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple. [6] "If you are the Son of God," he said, "throw yourself down. For it is written: "'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'" [7] Jesus answered him, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test.'" [8] Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. [9] "All this I will give you," he said, "if you will bow down and worship me." [10] Jesus said to him, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only.'" [11] Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him.

Jesus consistently runs into the name of the Lord, into the truth of who God is, and He is delivered from evil.

If you feel like you have repented and tried and nothing has worked, there is one weapon that God has given us to combat sin and develop self-control, and that is the spiritual discipline of fasting.

Fasting, which at its essence is abstaining from food for a period of time in order to seek the Lord with more intentionality and fervency, is neglected by most Christians today but is a practice through which God can work mightily, especially in the area of overcoming addictions and gaining self-control. There is something about the stomach that is a doorway to the rest of our desires, and something about denying ourselves food and choosing God instead that can have a profound impact on our other cravings. As Thomas a Kempis, the 15th century author of *The*

Imitation of Christ, put it, "Restrain from gluttony, and you will the more easily restrain all of the inclinations of the flesh."

Most of us operate by the pleasure principle – if it feels good, I do it. If I want to eat it, I will. If it want to buy it, I will. This is what the world preaches to us and so many of us have bought into. But the more we live by the pleasure principle, the harder it is to exercise self-control. The more instinctively we say yes to whatever we desire, the harder it is to say no when we really should. But fasting can break our bondage to the pleasure principle. As Augustine wrote about why we should fast: "Because it is sometimes necessary to check the delight of the flesh with respect to licit pleasures in order to keep it from yielding to illicit joys."

In **Romans 12:1**, Paul wrote "Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship." When we fast, we are offering our bodies to the Lord as an act of worship. I believe that God honors that decision, and, when we deny ourselves food in order to serve Him, He gives us His supernatural power to break the bonds of sin and exercise self-control in any area of our life.

The good news is that you don't need to undergo a 40-day fast to test God in this. You can fast for one meal, or skip breakfast and dinner for one day, drinking water instead and asking God to purify your heart, increase your self-control, and break the bonds of sin in your life.

And in addition to fasting, consider what it would look like to take a break from whatever your idol is – to delete the social media app, to take a day off from your phone, to not buy anything for a week, to give up desserts, to resolve to talk less. Do you really want freedom? Or are you just saying you do, but in reality you're not willing to sacrifice anything for it?

Hebrews 12:4 - In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

Does fasting feel like too much of a sacrifice? Maybe it's because you don't really want to follow Jesus. You just want enough of Him to be saved.

As Jesus said to his disciples in **Matthew 16:24-26**, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find

it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?”

Expose your idols for the false gods they are and repent of them. They are not a fortified city that will protect you from the troubles of this world. They are a broken-down city, and you are not safe there. Repent of them, and fast, seeking the Lord with the desperation your situation requires, before your idols kill you!

2) Tap into the power of community

The reality it is that most of us, even with repentance and fasting, will struggle with self-control if we try to fight our battles by ourselves. This is why God has given us community, to be our strength when we are weak. There is a reason that recovery movements don’t just start with confession, but rely upon the power of community, mentors, and accountability partners in order to increase self-control and gain victory over addiction.

James 5:16 - Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

Galatians 6:1 - Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted.

Wherever you lack self-control, you need at least someone you trust in your life who knows and is praying for you and holding you accountable. We all need people who will remind us of the truth of who God is and what it is that we truly want.

Ephesians 4:15 - Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will grow to become in every respect the mature body of him who is the head, that is, Christ.

There is great power in community to grow in self-control.

Proverbs 27:17 - As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another.

Hebrews 10:24–25 - And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, [25] not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

You may need a support group, a sponsor, or an accountability partner. Power is broken when sin is brought into the daylight. We usually don't bring it up for fear that someone will think less of us, but they will likely think more of us for trusting us with their issues. If you are struggling with self-control, a great place to start is to confess your sins to someone who can help hold you accountable.

3) Properly order your loves

The real key to self-control comes when God becomes your greatest desire. Saint Augustine said that sin is disordered love; chaos comes when we love anything more than God. But self-control comes when He is the one thing you desire above all else. When pleasing Him, knowing Him, loving Him, becomes the passion of your heart, then you become a person of self-control, a person who desires are properly ordered, a person who consistently chooses the important thing over the urgent thing. When that happens, it is less about putting into place safeguards or systems, but about living out of a heart that desires to honor Him and love others.

Titus 2:11–14 - For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. [12] It teaches us to say "No" to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, [13] while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, [14] who 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.

The grace of God woos our heart away from our idols. As we get to know our God and His love for us as displayed in Jesus' death for us, we are transformed so that our desire becomes more and more to honor Him, to know Him, to please Him. And as we yield to His Holy Spirit, this produces in us increasing self-control.

2 Timothy 1:7 - For the Spirit God gave us does not make us timid, but gives us power, love and self-discipline.

Thomas Chalmers, the 19th century pastor and theologian, put it this way: "No one changes a habit just by trying – 'oh, I shouldn't be like that.' The only way to dispossess an old affection is by the expulsive power of a new affection." His point is that the more that you see the beauty of God's grace, the easier it becomes to let go of your idols and look to Him for all you need. It's like those who have a child, and their love for their daughter makes them quit drinking or drugging.

How does He become your first love? By seeing His love for you when you despite your lack of self-control.

Hebrews 12:1–3 - Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, [2] fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. [3] Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

What was the joy set before Him, the only thing He did not have in heaven? You! Out of love for you He came here to save you. Let His love transform you, and then fix our eyes on Jesus! For the joy set before Him endured the cross. He took the crown of thorns, even though we were disqualified, so that we could have the crown of life.

How do you become more self-controlled? Expose your idols for the false gods they are and repent of them, fasting if you can. Tap into the power of community. And properly order your loves, letting God's love produce in you self-control.

What are you going to do with this word today? Do you really want self-control? Do you really want to give up your idols? Remember again the words of Hebrews:

Hebrews 12:4 - In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

Are you willing to put in the effort? Consider Paul's words:

1 Corinthians 9:24–27 - Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. [25] Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever. [26] Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air. [27] No, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

Self-control is worth it. Self-discipline is critical if you want to live wisely. Turn from sin and turn to Jesus and allow Him to produce in you self-control, that you might live wisely and bring life to yourself and to others.