

FRUIT NO. 9: SELF-CONTROL (I Samuel 26)

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INTRODUCTION

It's interesting that our "fruit" today is "self-control." It's ironic because, everywhere we look, all we often see is "self" completely out of control. Just saying some individual names quickly brings to our mind's instances where people and mentalities and emotions were completely out of control: Columbine, Virginia Tech, Sandy Hook, Las Vegas, a synagogue in Pittsburgh, a couple mosques in New Zealand. How about some other words or phrases: Fentanyl, child abuse, sexual abuse, suicide, the internet, family, morality, even love. And then there's another side: Because of so often feeling that we are surrounded by so much out of control, our culture often celebrates those times when somebody fights back, and their enemies "get what's coming to them." Clint Eastwood made a career in Hollywood with movies that featured him getting his revenge. In the Oscar-winning movie, "The Godfather," James Caan as Sonny Corleone famously said to his father in explaining a Mafia war he was currently waging: "They hit us, so we hit them back." We seem like a country to live by the credo: "Do unto others BEFORE they do unto you." Makes you wonder where it's all going to end.

And yet "self-control" is listed as another of the "fruit of the Spirit." So, what does self-control actually look like? Maybe a story out of the Old Testament will give us some ideas.

TEXT

The Ziphites went to Saul at Gibran and said, "Is not David hiding on the hill of Hakilah, which faces Jeshimon?" So Saul went down to the Desert of Ziph, with his three thousand select Israelite troops, to search there for David. Saul made his camp beside the road on the hill of Hakilah facing Jeshimon, but David stayed in the wilderness — I Samuel 26:1-3a.

This story takes place in a rugged wilderness area about 25-26 miles west of the Dead Sea and about 21 miles south of Jerusalem. The land rises from about 1,400 feet below sea level to just under 2,900 feet above sea level.

Now by this point in time, Saul knew that he had already lost the kingdom. Saul's acts of disobedience to God's commands had caused that to happen: ***"[Y]our kingdom will not endure; the Lord has sought out a man after His own heart and appointed him ruler of His people, because you have not kept the Lord's command. . . . Because you have rejected the word of the Lord, He has rejected you as king. . . . The Lord has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today and has given it to one of your neighbors — to one better than you" — Samuel, I Samuel 13:14; 15:23b, 28.***

Now Saul had had it in for David ever David had taken down Goliath. When the women came out to meet the victorious forces after their victory over the Philistines, they had serenaded Saul and his troops with that old standard: ***Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands — I Samuel 18:7b.*** From that moment on, Saul lived in fear of David, his jealousy essentially driving him mad. [REMEMBER JOHN THE BAPTIST REGARDING JESUS? Jesus must >, I must <]

Saul had used 3,000 Israelite troops to previously search for David (I Samuel 24). But Saul was continually frustrated in all his attempts to capture David, largely because, as that story tells us:

Day after day Saul searched for him, but God did not give David into his hands — I Samuel 23:14b.

When he saw that Saul had followed him there, he sent out scouts and learned that Saul had definitely arrived. Then David set out and went to the place where Saul had camped. He saw where Saul and Abner son of Ner, the commander of the army, had lain down. Saul was lying inside the camp, with the army encamped around him — I Samuel 26:3b-5.

The Hebrew word for “camp” gives us the picture of round or perimeter; the idea is of encirclement — and Saul is what is being circled. He’s dead center in the middle of the circle, and everybody else, all 3,000 select troops are lying around him. And to add to his protection, the commander of all those troops is laying right next to him. It was assumed that, with this arrangement, anybody getting at the king would be impossible.

David then asked Ahimelek the Hittite and Abishai son of Zeruiah, Joab’s brother, “Who will go down into the camp with me to Saul?” “I’ll go with you,” said Abishai. So David and Abishai went to the army by night, and there was Saul, lying asleep inside the camp with his spear stuck in the ground near his head. Abner and the soldiers were lying around him — I Samuel 26:6-7.

The spear stuck in the ground near Saul’s head would have been seen as a symbol of Saul’s royal authority. At least three times Saul used a spear in an attempt to kill David when he was serving Saul in the royal court.

While this is the only time Ahimelek is mentioned, we know a lot more about Abishai. He was one of David’s nephews; his brother Joab would eventually become the commander of Israel’s army once David became king. The Bible tells us that, while he was a very brave and loyal man, eventually becoming the head of David’s elite bodyguard detail, he was also a very violent and vengeful man. He and his brother Joab would conspire together some time later to murder Saul’s army commander, Abner (the guy sleeping closest to Saul at this moment), after he left Saul to come over to David’s side, because Abner had in the course of battle killed their brother Asahel.

Abishai said to David, “Today God has delivered your enemy into your hands. Now let me pin him to the ground with one thrust of the spear; I won’t strike him twice” — I Samuel 26:8.

Abishai is certain that it is God that has left David’s enemy Saul in such a vulnerable position, and he asks for the opportunity on behalf of David to rid him of his enemy once and for all. He is confident that this won’t take more than one strike of the spear to kill him. What’s chilling is how quickly and casually Abishai is ready to kill another human being. He doesn’t even see Saul as the king; all he sees is ENEMY!

But David said to Abishai, “Don’t destroy him! Who can lay a hand on the Lord’s anointed and be guiltless? As surely as the Lord lives,” he said, “the Lord Himself will strike Him, or his time will come and he will die, or he will go into battle and perish. But the Lord forbid that I should lay a hand on the Lord’s anointed. Now get the spear and water jug that are near his head, and let’s go.” So David took the spear and water jug near Saul’s head, and they left. No one saw or knew about it, nor did anyone wake up. They were all sleeping, because the Lord had put them into a deep sleep — I Samuel 26:9-12.

Instead of David doing the natural thing, even the obvious thing, he settles instead on just taking a couple of Saul’s possessions — items that Saul would understand as having been right by his side, telling him how close his enemy had been to him. Pretty cool response, especially because,

by this time, God had specifically chosen David to be king of Israel; as he had commanded Samuel: ***“Fill your horn with oil and be on your way; I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem. I have chosen one of his sons to be king.” . . . So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed [David] in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit of the Lord came powerfully upon [him] — I Samuel 16:1b, 13.*** And yet David continued to view Saul as “the Lord’s anointed.” He was still the one sitting on the throne of Israel. David was still determined to be Saul’s loyal subject. Since God had chosen Saul to be king, it would be God who would see to his end, not David. David proved by his actions that he was choosing God’s judgments even over his own to both deal with Saul and take care of himself.

Then David crossed over to the other side and stood on top of the hill some distance away; there was a wide space between them. He called out to the army and to Abner son of Ner, “Aren’t you going to answer me, Abner?” Abner replied, “Who are you who calls to the king?” David said, “You’re a man, aren’t you? And who is like you in Israel? Why didn’t you guard your Lord the king? Someone came to destroy your lord the king. What you have done is not good. As surely as the Lord lives, you and your men must die, because you did not guard your master, the Lord’s anointed. Look around you. Where are the king’s spear and water jug that were near his head?” — I Samuel 26:13-16.

Not only Saul but Abner and all his men realize that this has been far more than a narrow escape. This has been an enemy who could have killed their king and yet chose not to. They don’t even realize he had also intervened to make sure that one of his own men did not kill Saul, either.

Saul recognized David’s voice and said, “Is that your voice, David my son?” David replied, “Yes it is, my lord the king.” And he added, “Why is my lord pursuing his servant? What have I done, and what wrong am I guilty of? Now let my lord the king listen to his servant’s words. If the Lord has incited you against me, then may he accept an offering. If, however, people have done it, may they be cursed before the Lord! They have driven me today from my share in the Lord’s inheritance and have said, ‘Go, serve other gods.’ Now do not let my blood fall to the ground far from the presence of the Lord. The king of Israel has come out to look for a flea — as one hunts a partridge in the mountains” — I Samuel 26:14-20.

Basically, for the second time in recent history, David asks Saul, “What have I done? Why are you doing this to me?” And in deference to Saul’s kingship, David asks why such a great man — Saul — would be wasting his time going after somebody of the same insignificance as a flea. When chased earlier by Saul, David had made a similar comparison, suggesting he was nothing but a “dead dog” by comparison to the king. But his plea is the same: “Tell me what I’ve done to have you work so hard to destroy somebody as small and meaningless as me.”

Then Saul said, “I have sinned. Come back, David, my son. Because you considered my life precious today, I will not try to harm you again. Surely I have acted like a fool and have been terribly wrong” — I Samuel 26:21.

Saul is again acknowledging the error of his ways. Saul does seem to marvel in both instances that David, even when given ample opportunity, has done him no harm; as he had said previously: ***“[T]he Lord delivered me into your hands, but you did not kill me. When a man finds his enemy, does he let him get away unharmed?” — King Saul, I Samuel 24:18b-19a.*** When this had happened previously, Saul had even gone as far as his son Jonathan in predicting David’s future: ***“I know that you will surely be king and that the kingdom of Israel will be established in your hands” — King Saul, I Samuel 24:20.***

“Here is the king’s spear,” David answered. “Let one of your young men come over and get it. The Lord rewards everyone for their righteousness and faithfulness. The Lord delivered you into my hands today, but I would not lay a hand on the Lord’s anointed. As surely as I valued your life today, so may the Lord value my life and deliver me from all trouble.” Then Saul said to David, “May you be blessed, David my son; you will do great things and surely triumph.” So David went on his way, and Saul returned home — I Samuel 26:22-25.

APPLICATION

So, what exactly is self-control? It means to restrain one’s emotions, actions and desires, and to be in harmony with the will of God. It means choosing God’s will versus living for yourself. This story is a truly amazing picture of David’s choosing God’s will over his own, and a wonderful picture of self-control.

Now some people would say: “I wouldn’t have blamed David a bit for killing Saul. Look what he’d been trying to do to David.” Well, just for fun, let’s see how many “self-defense” arguments David could make that could justify his having Saul killed:

Saul had swindled David out of marrying his oldest daughter.

Saul has tried to personally kill David at least three times.

Saul sent soldiers to David’s home to kill him after his marriage.

Saul had sent David on dangerous missions in the hopes of having him killed in battle.

Saul had attacked his own son Jonathan because of his relationship with David.

Saul had killed priests who had aided David in his fleeing from Saul.

Saul had hunted David before (I Samuel 24) in the hope of capturing and/or killing him.

Yet David shows us something else, a different way to live. He shows a strength in refraining from revenge; he very literally does unto another what is NOT being done unto him. How can he do that? His focus is not on his life in that moment, nor on his future, nor even on his own self-satisfaction. His focus is on the Lord. He will bow to the Lord’s sovereignty in this matter. He will bow to the Lord’s greater wisdom and greater power in determining the outcome of Saul’s life. God doesn’t need David to settle affairs with Saul, and David trusts that God knows best.

Remind you of anybody? Jesus Christ showed us that same quality of self-control that David did. In three years of public ministry, Christ ran into a whole lot of people wanting to do nothing more than take Him down. They tried many different ways — including insults, threatening to push Him off a cliff, threatening to stone Him, trying to have Him arrested, constantly giving Him “trick” questions trying to trap Him, giving false testimony about Him — and, of course, eventually succeeding in killing Him. Yet what did the apostle Peter report about Jesus? ***When they hurled their insults at Him, He did not retaliate; when He suffered, He made no threats. Instead, He entrusted (literally, committed, surrendered) Himself to Him who judges justly — I Peter 2:23.***

So why is self-control so important? Because it stands out against a world with none. It reflects a life and lifestyle totally different than anything else the world knows. It is one of the most graphic displays that we are living for Someone else — Jesus Christ.

So how do we do that? How can we maintain self-control in this world? A couple of ideas, both of which revolve around the idea of God’s power:

First, recognize that we have the opportunity, we are invited, to live lives that are a demonstration of the Spirit's power. When Paul first came to Corinth, he said: ***My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power — Paul, I Corinthians 2:4.*** Likewise our lives, everything that people hear us say and watch us do, are also a demonstration of the Spirit's power in our lives, and its ability to change us from being self-pleasing and self-controlling to being completely changed and recreated by the power of God. Look at our culture: So many leaders whose sole purpose, it seems, is to injure and insult, to attack enemies without ever giving in. What part of showing Christ is that? What part of self-control is that? What part of resting in God is that? As Paul famously shared with the Corinthian Christians: ***[I]f anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! — Paul, II Corinthians 5:17.*** And the lives that the world sees? Lives that do not ***rest on human wisdom, but on God's power — Paul, I Corinthians 2:5.***

Second, recognize that we have access to this power. Paul told his young pastor friend Timothy that ***the Spirit God gave us . . . gives us power — Paul, II Timothy 1:7.*** It is among the last things that Christ says to His disciples before He returns to heaven: ***“[Y]ou will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you” — Jesus Christ, Acts 1:8a.*** How much power is that? Paul lets us know: ***That power is the same as the mighty strength He exerted when He raised Christ from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly realms — Paul, Ephesians 1:19b-20.*** As Peter described it: ***[God/s] divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and goodness — II Peter 1:3.*** And Paul wrote that we have access to that power because ***His Spirit [dwells] in [our] inner being, so that Christ may dwell in [our] hearts through faith — Paul, Ephesians 3:16b-17.*** That strength is based on the glorious riches of God Himself; that is where we are rooted to grow in Him. That's the power that allows us, as Christ shared in the Sermon on the Mount to, when slapped on the right cheek, to turn the other also; when asked for our shirt, to give our coats also; when asked to walk one mile, to walk two. And it is that power dwelling within us that will, as a result, ***do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to His power that's at work within us — Paul, Ephesians 3:20.***

CONCLUSION

The greatest display of self-control in the history of mankind? Three words found in the gospel of John related to Christ's being arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane: ***They bound Him — John 18:12b.*** He in whom God was pleased to have the fullness of His deity, everything He was, dwell; He who said, “He who has seen Me has seen the Father” — He controlled His self so well He allowed Himself to be bound. He did that for us, you know. He did that for us.

Are you having trouble with self-control? Do your emotions, your thoughts, sometimes get you in trouble? Do you want the power that provides self-control? Do you want another way to live, a better way to live? There is an answer: Jesus Christ. Come talk to me after the service. He still makes “all things new.” Let's pray!