

Matthew. 4.1-11 (St. Michael's – May 7, 2017)

Nicky Gumbel tells the story of being in college when his roommate received a delicious fruitcake from home. However, the roommate was busy and couldn't eat the cake right away and so it just sat there in all of its tempting glory.

As Nicky gazed upon this fruitcake he noticed it wasn't completely rectangular. It was slightly out of balance. And so Nicky thought he'd do his friend a favor by straightening it on one side. However, after doing so, he noticed that now it wasn't balanced on the other side either, and so he had to make another adjustment. But now the fruitcake looked a little odd with two sides cut and two uncut, and so he tidied it up a bit more.

Well, finally there wasn't much of the cake left, and so Nicky ultimately concluded that the kindest thing he could do for his roommate was simply to keep it 'out of sight, out of mind,' and so he finished it off.

Today we conclude our sermon series on the Fruit of the Spirit, and we come to possibly the least desired fruit of all. Self-control. With so much fun to be had in the world, so many fruitcakes to enjoy, who really wants self-control? As St. Augustine prayed, 'Lord, make me pure. But not yet.'

Yes, while love and joy may seem like apples and bananas—delicious and attractive fruit of the Spirit—when it comes to self-control many of us approach it like the Asian Durian fruit. A fruit that smells like 'turpentine and onions, garnished with a gym sock.' Or in the words of food critic Anthony Bourdain, 'Your breath will smell like you've been kissing your dead grandmother.'

So why would we want this fruit of self-control? Remarkably, the cover article of this month's *Christianity Today* is all about self-control. Written by a sociologist and a

neuroscientist, it observes that people with more self-control live longer, are happier, get better grades, are less depressed, are more physically active, have lower resting heart rates, have less alcohol abuse, have more stable emotions, are more helpful to others, get better jobs, earn more money, have better marriages, are more faithful in marriage, and sleep better at night.

And so perhaps this much-maligned fruit deserves a second chance? And of course we see the importance of this fruit in Scripture. In Proverbs we read that a person without self-control is like a city that has been broken into and left without walls. Utterly vulnerable to those who pillage and destroy. In Paul we find that self-control is a key requirement for church leadership, and he tells his readers how he disciplines his own body, like an athlete in training.

But course there's no self-control like what we see with Jesus Christ, especially when he's in the wilderness, being tempted by Satan. You know the story – Jesus is led by the Holy Spirit into the desert, where he fasts for 40 days. And at the end of 40 days who should show up, but the devil himself. And the devil plies Jesus with three temptations. The provision of bread, the protection of angels, and unlimited power. However, Jesus resists the temptations by holding fast to the Word of God and even declaring God's Word to the devil's face.

And so the first thing we see in this encounter, is that testing and temptation are not always bad. God sometimes uses them for good. After all, God is the one who led Jesus into the desert in the first place. As God tested Abraham by asking him to sacrifice Isaac, Jesus also is led to the brink of human endurance.

But why would God do this to His people?

So that our faith may be strengthened and we might become the people God created us to be. Steel can only be forged in fire. Gold can only be refined in the furnace.

The second thing we see is that Satan will use anything and everything to destroy our self-control. In the first temptation Satan goes after Jesus in his weakness. Scripture says Jesus was hungry. That's probably an understatement. A human being cannot fast for forty days without extreme physiological strain.

And Satan, having no scruples, goes right for the jugular. 'Jesus, I see you're starving. How about some homemade bread, still warm from the oven?' But of course Jesus responds with the Word of God, 'Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.' For Jesus, obedience is more important than bread, more important than life itself.

However, the second temptation is even more devious. For Satan now goes after Jesus in his place of strength. Jesus has resisted by using Scripture, so now Satan cunningly deploys Scripture as the second test. 'If you're the Son of God throw yourself down from the temple, for it's written, He will command his angels concerning you.' Yes, Satan is tempting Jesus where Jesus is strongest, his love for Scripture. One theologian observes this is a kind of spiritual jujitsu. 'If it is easiest to get us when we are weak, it's next easiest to get us where we are strong.'

I'm reminded of the movie *The Devil's Advocate*. It's a disturbing movie I wouldn't recommend, but it has a fascinating twist. Keanu Reeves plays a hotshot lawyer who's being seduced by the devil himself, played by Al Pacino. At the end of the movie there's an epic confrontation, and Reeves ultimately resists the devil's temptations.

However, in the very last scene as Reeves celebrates his victory, a reporter shows up and asks for an interview, promising to make Reeves a star. He agrees to do the interview. And then, in the very last seconds of the movie, the reporter transforms into the devil, who smiles and says, 'Vanity, my favorite sin.' Yes, even when we are victorious, the devil doesn't stop. And he's always willing to lose a battle, to win the war.

You ever been there? You've just had something good happen, you've done something positive for the kingdom. And the next thing you know you succumb to some idiotic temptation. Paul writes in Philippians 4 that he 'learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.' Who'd have thought we need to learn the secret to facing *plenty and abundance*?

Fortunately, unlike us and Keanu Reeves' character, Jesus withstands these cunning assaults. But how? What is the secret to his victory?

Let me suggest two things: The Holy Spirit and the Word of God. Not only was Jesus led by the Spirit into the wilderness, but Luke tells us Jesus was *full* of the Spirit, and of course he employed the *sword of the Spirit*, the Word of God. No, Jesus' self-control was neither willpower nor human striving. Rather, He was anchored in the Spirit and in the Word. His victory wasn't an accident, but the product of a lifetime of preparation.

The article in *Christianity Today* offers some fascinating insights into this kind of self-control. Some good news and some bad news.

First, the bad news: self-control is a finite resource. It's exhaustible and we only have so much. There was a study where two groups of students had to do a math problem. Both groups had a bowl of candy placed in front of them. However, one group was told that they couldn't touch the candy while they worked on the math problem.

It turns out that the group who couldn't eat the candy gave up on the math problem far sooner than the other group. Because their store of self-control was quickly exhausted by being expended on two fronts.

The researchers then note that the most common robbers of self-control are lack of sleep, eating sugar, being in a hurry, interpersonal conflict, multitasking, and checking email and social

media. If we regularly do these things we are going to have less self-control with which to fight the battle.

But now the good news. Self-control is also like a muscle which can be strengthened and developed. Like all the fruit of the Holy Spirit, it doesn't happen spontaneously but requires care and cultivation. The daily surrender of our lives to God.

And the cool thing is that as self-control is developed, it becomes second nature. Like riding a bicycle or brushing your teeth, you stop thinking about it. Research also shows it's best to start small. Reading your Bible 1 minute a day. When that becomes second nature, bump it up to 5 minutes, then 10, 20, 30.

N.T. Wright describes this process as virtue. 'Virtue is what happens when someone has made a thousand small choices requiring effort and concentration [and which don't] come naturally. And then, on the thousandth and first time, when it really matters, they [do it] automatically. Virtue is what happens when wise and courageous choices become second nature.'

And so again, what is the secret to self-control? It's really pretty simple. The daily discipline of abiding in Christ by letting his Word abide in us. And then being filled with the Spirit. This is the bedrock of all self-control. It was for Jesus. It must be for us.

In closing, however, some of you may now be feeling a little guilty, and self-control may still seem impossible. If this is you, I have some good news. The wonderful irony of Christian self-control, is that it actually has very little to do with *self*. The disciplines of Bible reading and prayer are not to make us spiritual superheroes. They're to remind us of our weakness and need. That we can't do anything on our own strength.

Jesus went toe to toe with Satan in the desert, not to show us how it's done, but because he knew we couldn't do it. He fought the battle we could not win—in the desert and on the cross—to give us an inheritance we cannot lose. The fruit of the Spirit.

Yes, just as salvation comes from acknowledging we cannot save ourselves, so does self-control come from acknowledging that our lives are unmanageable, and we need the grace of His Spirit, day-by-day, moment-by-moment.

Yes, discipline is important, but counterintuitively, the most important discipline of all, is reminding ourselves of our daily and desperate need for Jesus Christ.

And so people of St. Michael's, today as we celebrate our life together, let's get back to the basics. More than anything else, let's recommit ourselves to the Word and the Spirit. Not so that we may be great, but that we may remember our great God.

To Him be the glory, now and forever.