

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Pentecost 10
July 29, 2018
Sermon by Pastor Justin Gran
Delayed Gratification

—Galatians 5:22, 23
—Titus 2:2-14

Have you ever heard of the “marshmallow experiment?” Researchers give one marshmallow to a child in a waiting room. The researcher tells the child, “Here is one marshmallow. You can eat it now and that’s all you get, or you can wait just 15 minutes and if you haven’t eaten it, I’ll give you another one when I come back.” If you’ve never seen this, you should look up a video online (there are plenty). For some children it’s a grueling battle of their will to not eat the marshmallow. The child stares at it. He pokes it. He picks it up and sniffs. He brings it to his lips and you can see his agony. He wants to hold out for a better reward. But he just can’t help it. He loses the little self-control he had. He takes bite. He enjoys it... for three seconds until it’s gone. The purpose of the experiment is to test and maybe even to teach a child to delay gratification. Can the child exercise enough self-control? Can he say “no” to instant gratification and hold out for something better? Can you exercise self-control?

The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and [finally] self-control. In our text for today Paul commands a young pastor named Titus to teach men and women, young and old alike to be self-controlled. A Lesson from Titus 2:2-14:

Teach the older men to be temperate, worthy of respect, self-controlled, and sound in faith, in love and in endurance.

³ Likewise, teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good. ⁴ Then they can train the younger women to love their husbands and children, ⁵ to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God.

⁶ Similarly, encourage the young men to be self-controlled. ⁷ In everything set them an example by doing what is good. In your teaching show integrity, seriousness ⁸ and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned, so that those who oppose you may be ashamed because they have nothing bad to say about us.

¹¹ For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. 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 glorious appearing 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.

Self-control. The word is used four times in English, five times in Greek, in the verses I just read. That must mean that self-control is pretty important in the life of a Christian. And here’s why: As a Christian you have two selves. You have your sinful self (sometimes called the Old Adam). But you also have a new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness. Your old self wants what is contrary to God and what is ultimately harmful for your soul. Your new self wants what is pleasing to God and what is beneficial for your soul and the souls of others. Your old self wants instant gratification for the flesh, fleeting creature comforts, and carnal pleasure. Your new self waits because you know something better is in store, it finds comfort not in what can be touched and seen, it finds pleasure in God’s will. In Christ you are a new creation. You have a new self, and by this you must control your old self and all its evil desires or else it will control you to the point of death.

So how is your self-control? Is this fruit abundant in your Christian life, or does it need some cultivating? If you were to have your own little marshmallow experiment how would you do? You’re in a private room and whatever your marshmallow is, it’s placed in front of you. Every ones marshmallow is going to be different. Maybe yours is a wad of cash. Maybe it’s another drink. Maybe it’s witty word that cuts someone down. Maybe it’s a morsel of juicy gossip. Maybe it’s smart phone ready to consume your time. Maybe it’s a computer mouse and just few clicks away from greed or lust. That thing testing your self-control could be something in moderation isn’t bad or sinful, but it becomes so when your heart turns it into an idol. Or maybe the marshmallow in front of you testing your self-control is a dark, dirty secret sin. Do you want whatever gratification it gives you in the moment? Do you snatch it up; enjoy it for a short time? Or do you exercise self-control and wait for something even better, something more fulfilling, something purer?

Sadly, sometimes instead of having self-control and delaying gratification, we end up delaying sanctification. “I’ll indulge a little now, I’ll please myself and my selfish desires now, and then later I’ll clean up my act. I’ll do what makes me happy in the moment, but I’ll do what makes God happy tomorrow. I’ll throw in the towel and just let the sinful self have what it wants now, but I won’t let it get out hand. I’ll just have the one more drink, but next weekend I’ll be back on the wagon. I know I’ll regret these words but I’m going to say it anyway and then

afterwards I'll apologize profusely. I'll throw the old sinful nature a bone today, but I'll repent later. But if I can't control myself and the desires of my old self now, what makes me think I'll be able to do it later? There might not be a later...

...but there is a now. There is a today. So Let's clean up our act now. Let's repent now not later, because now is the time of God's grace. Now. Right now. The sinful self wants instant gratification right now. Immediately. Our sinful selves think they know what we need to make things better in the moment. But the sinful self is completely unaware of God's infinite grace, his undeserved love for sinners. And that grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ is a right-now reality. God has not delayed his grace for the countless times we've delayed the holy living he desires. God does not dangle his forgiveness like a marshmallow on a string. ***"For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all [mankind]."***

Look what God has given you right now: Himself! These latter verses of Titus two are actually the epistle lesson for Christmas Eve every year. Picture that. Christmas in July. Little Jesus lying in a manger. So often our hearts have longed for bigger, better, top of the line, ultimate and extravagant stuff and experiences. But there's Jesus. A little baby lying in a manger. Not what our hearts would have ever dreamed of on their own, but what only God could conceive. In Jesus Christ is the fullness of God, ***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.***

And by the grace of God revealed in Jesus Christ, that is who you are. You are redeemed—ransomed from the wickedness and destruction of your own sinful nature. That sinful self doesn't have to control you anymore. You are purified—washed clean by the blood of Christ through the waters of baptism. Go back to those waters and drown the old self and its desires and put on a new self. That is who you are—a new creation in Christ. You are his very own, eager to do what is good.

The young Pastor Titus was charged with teaching all of his people to be self-controlled, and so is this young pastor. However, Titus didn't have to give his congregation an intensive 30-day program to instill in them the fruit of self-control. All he had to do was teach them and remind them about the grace of God because ***"[grace] teaches us to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age."***

Right now, you have the grace of God—his love and his forgiveness. You have his grace given you in baptism. You have an ever-flowing fount of grace in the written gospel. He gives you his grace in the Lord's Supper. These are the means by which God generously dishes out his grace. Remember that grace and forgiveness which teaches us to say "No!" to all the wicked things our old self wants. It's not the fear of punishment. It's the certainty of full and free forgiveness that motivates our self-control. The next time the marshmallow is in front of you and your self-control is being tested, if you look into yourself to find the will power, all you'll likely find an old self saying, "you can't help. Just do it." But you can help it; by the God's grace his Spirit that he has given you. You can hold out and say no to instant gratification because you know the grace that God has given you. You can hold out because you know that something better than what this world offers is coming.

That's delayed gratification—passing on the worldly passions of the right now and waiting for something better. And that takes self-control. Don't snatch up those instant gratifications and just live for the moment. Don't just play now and pay later, because something better is coming. Even when our world talks about self-control and delayed gratification, there's usually a specific goal. Whether it's a thinner waistline, more financial freedom, better grades, a promotion at work... These are all good things, but self-control as a fruit of the Spirit has even greater goal in sight. We are able to say no to the passing pleasures of this world and the evil desires that enslave because we know and hope for something better, something more fulfilling, something purer. And so we wait, because what could be better than this? ***We wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, 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.***

Amen