Believe: The Virtue of Self Control
Titus 2:11-13

In John 15, Jesus provides a metaphor for the Christian life that helps us to understand His intent for those who would be His disciples. Here is what He said, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may be even more fruit. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”

As we have gone through this series called Believe, we have observed that to be a disciple of Jesus begins first believing what Jesus believed. That means, in light of what Jesus just said in John 15, that we must come to accept the truth that we are dependent branches that can do nothing if we are not attached to the Vine.

But in addition to agreeing with what Jesus said, there is a role we must play in cultivating the truth of what Jesus said into our lives. Our role is to practice living the way that Jesus practiced living. Jesus alluded to our role when he charged the “branches” to intentionally “abide” in the vine. That seems like a bizarre thing to say, for the branches of a grapevine inevitably abide in the vine by their very nature. Yet here is where the human heart differs from a branch: the human heart must choose to abide in Jesus…we have the freedom to abide, and the freedom not to. If we abide, says Jesus, we will bear fruit. If we do not abide…we will not bear fruit. And if we do not bear fruit, the Gardner will come and cut the useless branch away from the vine and toss it into the fire.

So…we must abide in Jesus to bear fruit, but how do we abide in Christ? This question leads us to the 10 core practices of the Christian life…those things that have historically been referred to as the “spiritual disciplines.” We recently unpacked some of those practices including prayer, Bible study, worship, single-mindedness, obedience, total surrender, faithful stewardship, sharing our faith, and other practices that cultivate the presence and power of Christ in our lives. The more we practice, the more saturated we become with the Jesus life, and over time, our lives will bear a resemblance to the life of Jesus…and that will be the very fruit that Jesus promised us in John 15.

(8:00) The “fruit” of the Jesus life is this: we will begin to bear the “virtue” of Jesus in our own character. We have already looked at the virtue of agape love, the virtue of joy and the virtue of peace. This morning we will shall examine the Christ-like virtue of self-control.

I will unpack the virtue of self-control under three subheadings: 1) the unique attributes of Christian “self-control;” 2) why we often fail to obtain the virtue of Christian self-control; and 3) practical instruction for cultivating Christian self-control.

I. The Christian notion of self-control

As is the case with all of the virtues, self-control is not an exclusively “Christian” concept. Just as love, joy, and peace are universally recognized virtues, so it is that all
people...atheists and believers alike...consider self-control to be a desirable and admirable virtue. So, what is “self-control,” and how does the Christian notion of this virtue differ from that of an atheist or our society in general?

Webster defines self-control in this way: restraint exercised over one's own impulses, emotions, or desires. Google adds to that definition: “self-mastery.”

Now, what’s the first thing that pops into your mind when I say the words “self-control?” Food, right!

I have a hunting buddy who recently decided he needed to lose some weight. I had heard him mention this conviction on numerous occasions, but for several months there was no change in his eating or exercise habits, so he was not at all losing weight. However, one day...after a long afternoon of bird-hunting, I tempted him to stop in at the all-you-can-eat buffet that was on our way back to Kansas City. Now...when I say I tempted him, I literally described in detail the succulent, completely indulgent food that awaited two hungry hunters...I mean, I laid it on heavy because I was hungry and that is where I wanted to eat! But to his credit, my friend exercised incredible self-control and finally talked me out of stopping to eat at all! I saw this friend recently and I’m proud to say that he has lost close to 30 pounds! Now that’s self-control, right?

Well...yes, to some degree. We all know that if our goal is to lose weight, it will require some self-control to cut down on the carbs and more frequently visit the gym. This kind of self-control is a matter of the will, and in the end, it is a matter of what matters most to us. If losing weight is more important to me than feasting on a big buffet, then I must prioritize my long-term goal and leverage my will to overcome the short-term indulgence of the buffet. Another way to think of this virtue is “delayed gratification.” We choose not to indulge in the short-term because we are holding out for the payoff that comes when we wait. Life is full of these kinds of situations.

If I want to get a promotion, I have to exercise self-control when my boss says something that offends me or when he makes me do the grunt work. If I want to have a happy marriage, I have to exercise self-control when it comes to indulging my hobbies or spending too much time away from home. If I want to have a good relationship with my kids, I need to exercise self-control so that I don’t fly off the handle every time they leave the door open or forget to do their chores. In the end, however, the practice of self-control is a means to getting what I want out of life...right? I want to look good, I want to be happy, I want to be successful, I want to be respected, so self-control is a necessary virtue if I ever hope to get what I want.

We also understand the need for self-control when it comes to resisting destructive habits of thinking and behavior. We know that if we let our minds dwell on sexually explicit books, pictures, or videos, we are likely to indulge in sexual impropriety. We know that if we let our minds dwell on the ways that people have hurt us, we are likely to feel angry, perhaps violent, and we may even act out on that behavior in destructive ways. We know that if we happen to be with the wrong group of people who are all getting wasted, we might be tempted to get drunk and then do things we will regret later. So...we attempt self-control in terms of our thought life and our behaviors in order to remain healthy and to not self-destruct in some way.
For some of us, this battle with self-control has become a full-fledged war as we fight an addiction that now rules our lives. Self-control is no laughing matter for the addict…it is a battle every single day, every minute of the day. For many people, the hope of ever having the “self-control” necessary for breaking out of an addiction seems all but impossible.

In all these examples, the common denominator is this: self-control is leveraging the power of our will to get what we want--be that a skinny waistline, a better job, or freedom from our addictions. Our self-control, should we muster it up, serves our agenda and it also results in our glory, right? My friend is to be admired for his self-control that led him to lose 30 pounds, my friend benefits as a result of his efforts, and he gets the credit for his self-control and discipline.

Now, to some extent, this is where the virtue of Christian self-control differs from the world’s understanding of self-control. Let me show you.

When we study the Bible, we discover that the Christian virtue of self-control is actually the power to NOT get what we want or think we deserve for God’s glory and His agenda!

Listen to how Paul writes about self-control in his letter to Titus: For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Did you hear the difference between the common understanding of self-control and the Christian virtue of self-control?

1) The virtue of Christian self-control is a result of God’s grace and the salvation He offers freely in Christ—it is not essentially a matter of our will. This is super important…the virtue of Christian self-control comes about as a fruit of the Spirit…it is a supernaturally supplied power when Christ lives in us…it is the power of God, that over time, fortifies our will to resist temptations that no amount of our human effort could resist on its own.

2) The virtue of Christian self-control is the power to say “NO” to ungodliness and worldly passions—it’s the power to say “NO” to the indulgent nature of our flesh as well as the temptations of the fallen world in which we live. Christian self-control doesn’t hinge on, “What’s best for me in the end?” Christian self-control hinges on, “What is God’s best for me and for the situation at hand?”

3) The Christian virtue of self-control is the power to live upright, godly lives in this present, evil age—to live as the LIGHT of Christ in a hurting culture. Without this virtue of Christian self-control, we will not be able to live upright…we will be knocked flat on our backs by our own sinful nature and the temptations of the world. Such is why many of us suffer from a “powerless” form of Christianity. We agree with the information, but we lack this virtue of self-control, so we feel powerless to live “upright” lives. I’ll come back to this observation in just a minute.

4) The Christian virtue of self-control is the power to wait for the fulfillment of our hope…which is the glory of God in Jesus Christ. In the end, Christian self-control is the power to wait with faith and hope for that which cannot be seen…even for that which may not come to pass in our lifetimes on earth. Christian self-control is willing to place our ultimate fulfillment in God’s glory and God’s agenda, even at the expense of our own personal fulfillment.
Think about Jesus in Luke 4. The Holy Spirit has led Jesus into the desert where he has been without food for 40 days. Luke insightfully writes, “And when [the 40 days] were ended, he was hungry.” That is the understatement of the age, right? Jesus was more than hungry…he was literally on the door of death. So Satan tempts Jesus in Luke 4:3, “If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become bread.”

Satan is tempting Jesus on three fronts: 1) prove your identity by performing a miracle; 2) feed your starving body; and 3) take your power and go feed the starving world. If you think about it, for Jesus to turn stones into bread to prove his identity while feeding himself and others could hardly be considered evil or indulgent. This is not a temptation that is unreasonable…in fact, this temptation is so practical and reasonable that most of us could easily be talked into turning stones into bread if we had the ability to do so, right? But Jesus demonstrates self-control—he gets His marching orders from the Father, and He will not participate in Satan’s game, even if the temptation appears to be completely reasonable for his career, his health, and the well being of others. Here we see that the virtue of self-control is the ability of Jesus to NOT use His power, to not get what he wanted, to NOT protect Himself even though his own survival hung in the balance. This is a whole different level of self-control…this is God-control…it is, in the end, the power to deny oneself for the sake of God’s glory and agenda. Jesus defends Himself against the temptation of Satan by quoting Deut. 8:3, “Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord.” Jesus trusted God…and that trust was the source and the power of His self-control.

II. Why we often fail to obtain the virtue of Christian self-control.

This leads me to my second point: why we often fail to obtain the virtue of Christian self-control. I spent many hours trying to write this next point, and I’ve done my best to make it clear, but I’m asking you to think hard with me for a minute. What I’m about to jump into is not easy, but it’s true…and it’s a big deal if we can wrap our minds around it. There are many reasons that well-intentioned Christians do not acquire the virtue of Christian self-control, but the number one reason is this: we don’t actually believe what Jesus believed. Let’s go back to Jesus in the desert for a moment.

Jesus operated under the conviction that the Father was all powerful, and fully competent to provide for His needs. He believed that the Father’s agenda was perfect and unquestionably the BEST for Him and for all people, even if that agenda required him to suffer. Jesus did not operate under the assumption that he was entitled to security, ego gratification, or the satisfaction of his bodily desires. Had Jesus secretly harbored such convictions (like most of us do), 40 days of starvation would have revealed his actual beliefs…and given the temptation and opportunity to turn stones into bread, Jesus would have easily dismissed God’s will with the rationalization, “Well, I’m no good to God if I’m dead; after all, a man’s gotta eat.”

Here is where we typically part ways with Jesus. Unlike Jesus, many of us operate on two sets of beliefs: 1) we have our religious beliefs; and 2) we have our functional beliefs. In normal circumstances we can operate on our religious beliefs, but when push comes to shove, when we are put under pressure, our functional beliefs are revealed. This is when many of us will justify disobedience to God and indulge in sinful behavior because of our unspoken commitment to our own self-preservation, comfort, ego, and actualization. I know that sounds normal and reasonable.
to you…but trust me, it is in this unspoken commitment to your functional, normal beliefs that makes Christian self-control impossible. Your functional, unspoken commitment to self-preservation, comfort, ego and advancement are also the fertile ground for EVIL.

In his book, The Spirit of the Disciplines, Dallas Willard observes: the persistence of evil rests upon the general drift of human life in which we all share. It rides upon a motion so vast, so pervasive and ponderous that, like the motion of the planet earth, it is almost impossible to detect. We delude ourselves about the sustaining conditions of people’s evil deeds because we wish to continue living as we now live and continue being the kinds of people we are. We do not want to change. We do not want our world to be really different. We just want to escape the consequences of its being what it truly is and of our being who we truly are.

I want you to think about that last line: In our hearts, we do not want to change ourselves or the world…we just want to escape the consequences of the world being what it truly is and of our being who we truly are. In other words, our efforts at self-control are simply efforts at “sin management.” It’s the difference between wanting to be healthy and not wanting to be fat! If my motivation to lose weight is vanity, I will starve myself, work out, and do whatever is necessary until my body shape meets my goals…but then I will resume being unhealthy until the consequences of my unhealthy lifestyle once again become unbearable, and then I will exercise self-control again to mitigate those consequences. However, if my goal is to become healthy, I will have to change my lifestyle…permanently. I will have to make a wholesale commitment to eat, sleep, and think differently about my body, eating, and exercise.

Now apply that picture to your life in general. Willard is saying, “We are all trying to look skinny, but we don’t really care about becoming healthy. And we are not interested in helping the world to become healthy, either.” Instead, we are OK with being unhealthy and the world being unhealthy as long as the consequences don’t inconvenience us too much. This is why the world’s concept of self-control falls short…and it’s also the reason that many of us never obtain the virtue of Christian self-control. The truth is…we don’t want to go there. We want just enough of “virtue” to look good, but we don’t want to bother with being transformed into a truly virtuous person.

If you ever get to know an honest alcoholic, he will be the first person to tell you that alcohol is not his problem…alcohol simply makes his problem impossible to hide. So what’s his problem? He has evil in his heart and he lives in an evil world…it’s the same problem you and I have…we just have different addictions with varying degrees of symptoms. And just like the alcoholic, most of us don’t want to change who we are…we don’t really want to change the world. We just want to mitigate the consequences of the way we are and the way the world is.

But let’s not pick on the alcoholic…let’s pick on the preacher. Here’s what I know about myself, and I suspect this is true for most of us: In my spirit I know God loves me and that Jesus is Lord. I know that God provides and that I can trust Him. However, in my flesh I still have unspoken goals to be safe and to keep my people safe, to be recognized, honored and respected, and to carve out as much comfort as possible. In other words, I have faith, but I still have very natural and “normal” assumptions and aspirations for my life that are operating in the flesh. Here’s what Willard is says to me and people like me:
My failure to see my own potential evil in those “normal” goals and assumptions, says Willard, shows a failure to understand that the immediate support of evils universally deplored lies in the simple readiness of “decent” individuals to harm others or allow harm of others when the conditions are “right.” That readiness comes into play whenever it will help us realize our goals of security, ego gratification, or satisfaction of bodily desires. This ever-present readiness fills common humanity and lies about us like a highly flammable material ready to explode at the slightest provocation. The level of this deadly “readiness” to do evil in all of its forms is variable from individual to individual, but it is very high in almost everyone. It is no mere abstract possibility but a genuine tendency, constantly at work. Thus, if in our lives we are not protected by a hearty confidence in God’s never failing and effective care for us, these “readinesses” for various kinds of wrongdoing will be constantly provoked into action by threatening circumstances.

In other words, no matter how hard we work at self-control, we are very susceptible…we have a readiness to do evil…that we are not even willing to acknowledge because we don’t want to deal with the fact that God may want to change the core goals and assumptions that make up our every day, normal lives. As C.S. Lewis once said, “We want God to numb the pain, but we won’t let Him pull the tooth!”

Think about your life: when we lose control--when we fail to exercise self-control to the degree that we end up saying and doing destructive things, it is almost always in that situation where we feel justified because somebody wronged us or at least threatened our core assumptions about life, thus we justifiably threw off all restraints. Somebody lied about me, so I got furious and let them have it. Somebody stole a client from me, so I sabotaged their work and got them fired…they had it coming. My wife withheld sex from me, so I indulged in porn…because, I have to have my needs met. Do you hear the self-justification that undermines our self-control? This is the danger zone…this is where our efforts at self-control break down time and time again.

Our justifications and assumptions are natural…they are the same justifications and behaviors we see all over the world, but the fundamental beliefs and goals that lead to our self-justification are completely contrary to those beliefs and goals that Jesus held to be true.

Let’s take justice for example. How would you handle somebody lying about you, taunting you, spitting in your face, and even robbing you of your clothes? I suspect for most of us, we would feel very justified in reacting with anger, violence, litigation, and revenge. Self-control would not even be a consideration…Why? Because most of us have a core assumption that “I don’t have to put up with being treated that way.” “I’m entitled to respect; I’m entitled to honor; I’m entitled to be safe; nobody steals my clothes and gets away with it!”

But let us observe Jesus. Jesus was mocked, whipped, spat upon, stripped and falsely accused…but Jesus did not retaliate. Was it because Jesus had no power? No. In fact, in Matthew 26 Jesus says to his abusers, “Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels?” Jesus had power…He had all the power! Jesus had every right by our normal human standards to call in the angels and wipe out the whole city of Jerusalem. But Jesus didn’t operate with our normal human standards. Jesus demonstrated self-
control because he trusted the Father to mete out justice as He saw fit. Jesus did not secretly believe that He had to defend His honor…He trusted the Father to defend His honor. Jesus understood that suffering was sometimes required for obedience sake, so he presented His body as a living sacrifice and died to accomplish God’s purpose…a purpose that Jesus trusted even when His flesh was frantically looking for a way out. We see this tension in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus shows the pinnacle of self-control, yielding to the Father’s will and allowing Himself to get arrested, even though…in his flesh…he was looking for a way out.

Now…in light of this difference between Jesus and most of us, think about what Paul writes in Romans 12:1-2, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

Here’s the heart of it: We are not our own. We belong to God; Jesus purchased us on a cross; our justice has already been accomplished; our justification is accomplished; our hope is secure; our Father’s love is unconditional; we exist now to serve God’s Kingdom, and we can trust that the Father will provide what we need. Thus, whether we live or die, we have nothing to fear! Until our minds are transformed to agree with this powerful truth…until we are willing to quit playing God and instead present our bodies as living sacrifices to God so that He can do with us as He pleases…until we undergo this kind of metamorphosis to where we actually believe what Jesus believed, we will only want skinny…not healthy. We will only want less consequences, not transformation. We will not long for what is good, acceptable, and perfect to God, we’ll continue to long for comfort, safety, honor, and revenge. We will only want to manage our sin and the sin of the world, we will never commit ourselves to God’s agenda which is to remake us into something new, and to save the world! Can you see that Christian self-control is only a possibility for those who will first allow their thinking to be transformed? We must come to believe what Jesus believed…and that means we must first come to understand that what we currently believe…our functional belief system…is part of the problem.

III. So, how do we cultivate the virtue of Christian self-control? We are out of time, but I want to simply point you back to where we started:

a) We must rehearse, memorize, and take to heart the promises of God that we find in scripture. If we believe in Jesus, we must continue to challenge ourselves to believe what Jesus believed and to act upon those beliefs, and the acting is so important. Take small steps to practice self-control based on who Jesus is and who we are in Christ. Don’t jump off a bridge when you fail, but don’t be satisfied with “sin-management.” As you begin to practice life based on the promises of God, our confidence will grow that we can trust God with bigger issues and temptations.

b) Pray and ask the Holy Spirit to convict you of those goals and assumptions that you operate on that are contrary to God’s Word; and be willing to repent of those goals and assumptions. Ask the Holy Spirit to transform your mind so that you will no longer live in conformity to the “natural” tendencies of your body and this world; then you will come to understand God’s good, pleasing, and PERFECT will for your life.
c) We must go back to the discipline of total surrender. This practice of total surrender gets very real when we consider totally surrendering our functional belief system. We must surrender our pride, our ego, our privilege, our ownership, our right to retaliate; our right to be comfortable; even our right to be safe! Study the life of Jesus, and then aspire to trust God like Jesus trusted God through total surrender.

d) Invite people to hold you accountable to those things that you are surrendering to God, and share your struggles with at least one other person who can cheer you on as you seek to cultivate and employ the virtue of Christian self-control.

e) Finally, abide in Christ, and ask your King for the power that you don’t have to say “NO” to the evil desires of your heart and the temptations to do evil in the world. Admit aloud each morning that you don’t have that power, and you cannot muster that power, apart from the very presence of God residing in you. This admission of our powerlessness is, again, a practice we must engage in every day. We cannot of our own efforts control ourselves, but we can give up the control of our “self” to our Lord and Savior. It takes practice and a whole lot of humility, but in the end, we will inherit the virtue of our Lord’s self-control, and I believe that is worth the trip.

The virtue of Christian self-control is one Jesus promised for those who would follow Him. Let us pray that this powerful virtue would become a reality for us all. Much depends on it. Let us pray.