

Fruit of the Spirit - Self-control (Ps 1, 1 Cor 9:24-27, Mark 9)

This morning I have the task of wrapping up our sermon series through the lens of self-control. I hoped to avoid preaching on 'self-control.' You see, of all the aspects of the Fruit of the Holy Spirit that we have been looking at, self-control is the one I personally feel the least good about. If there is an open packet of chocolate biscuits in the cupboard, my willpower is not adequate. I need much more of the fruit of self-control in my life. So, let us pray!

This man is Peter Theil. Peter Theil made his billions alongside Elon Musk with PayPal and has gone on to become a prominent Silicon Valley investor and has a scary surveillance tech company Palantir. Theil identifies as a Christian, yet hopes for a future that is troublingly transhumanistic. His "Christian vision" for the future of humanity means transcending the limitations of the human body. He believes humanity is to achieve perfection of human body: immortality, anti-aging, no more sickness. He wants the Biblical vision of the new heavens and new earth, of resurrected bodies, achieved through technological means. I would argue he wants the Christian 'end' without the Christian means – that is, by God through the redemptive work of Jesus Christ.

It's the ultimate expression of the desire for a better world without us having to become better people. Technology will get us there instead. Theil is pursuing a transhumanist vision in a way that only Silicon Valley billionaires can. But I wonder how in smaller and more subtle ways, technology holds out to all of us the promise of being able to do more, be more, know more, see more, than we were ever created for? Thanks to *these* (smartphones), are we all seeking, in some little ways, transcendence beyond the limitation of our ordinary human existence?

I want to suggest that self-control is the pursuing Christian of ends with Christian means.

We are at a crossroad. The crossroad that has always been before us: life and death (Deu. 30:19) Or in the words of Jesus, the crossroad of the narrow path and the broad path. Two contemporary prophetic voices, Wendell Berry and Stanley Hauerwas, name this crossroad for us:

- Berry: *'It is easy for me to imagine that the next great division of the world will be between people who wish to live as creatures and people who wish to live as machines.'*
- Hauerwas: *Christians of the future might be the only people with imperfections.*

Why would this be the case? Why do these two think Christians should and will ultimately reject the "machine way" of thinking and being in the world?

It's because technology is not 'value neutral.' We are told these things are simply tools that can be used for good or bad. But it's not simply whether we consume good or bad content. Technology itself shapes us in unforeseen ways. Take the car. The car had unforeseen consequences. The car has fundamentally changed the world. Socially, culturally, ecologically, and the wellbeing of our bodies.

The smartphone also. Generative AI already is doing so. There are negative externalities to technology that is incredibly difficult to bring to the surface. Think how difficult it has been to bring the ecological impacts into view. And that is something tangible. Think how much more difficult it is to bring unintended ethical, cultural, and psychological consequences into view.

Our wisdom line throughout this series has been: Just because we can do something doesn't mean we should. Yet it is equally true that if we can do something (if it makes our lives frictionless and easier), it becomes hard to not do it. I was recently asked by a student, 'what was it like to go through university without ChatGPT?' It is not enough to say, I will simply keep an eye on how I use these things.

So what wisdom can our faith and Scripture give us?

In our readings this morning, we have heard three metaphors that can help us regarding self-control, and a very strong metaphorical warning from Jesus.

Paul and the athlete

- The first metaphor is Paul treating the spiritual life like an athlete. Paul observes something that we observe today, there are a lot of people out there today who put a lot of time and energy into their bodies. They train, they are disciplined, they have plans. This is a good thing. But do we do the same with the state of our souls, do we take the same approach to the forces that are misshaping us? Athletes exert self-control to receive a perishable wreath, but we for an imperishable one. How much do we value obtaining the reward for our souls: the cultivation of the fruit of the Spirit in our lives?

Trees planted by water

- The second image comes from our Psalm, of the righteous being like trees planted by streams of water. Those who meditate and delight in the ways of God and do not go in the path of sinners and scoffers are like trees planted beside streams of water, yielding fruit in season. They can stand at the time of judgement. A tree is planted with intention and not easily moved with it takes root.

Proverbs: A city broken into and left without walls

- The third and most evocative image is from the book of Proverbs. *"Like a city whose walls are broken through, is a person who lacks self-control."* What is a wall? It is a form of defence. When do you build a wall? Obviously, it is too late when you see the army on the horizon. A defensive wall is built ahead of time, often strategy focused on areas of natural weakness.

These three images: Training... walls... planted... speak to intention and planning, ahead of time.

Regarding self-control, this means ideally knowing ahead red lines that we will not cross. We do this

(hopefully) with areas such as food, how we spend our money, temptations of sex and pornography, etc. I wonder though how many of us have thought through ahead of time of our (even seemingly benign) use of technology such as smart phones, social media, the use of Generative AI, and the like.

This is vitally important with tech use. The time to make the decision on how you might spend your evenings *before the fact*. It is too late when you plop down on the couch in the evening, phone in hand.

Jesus and taking our souls very seriously

Then we have the strong words of Jesus. Jesus is using hyperbolic language to make a clear point. Take sin seriously. Take seriously that which is harming your soul. If your smartphone is causing you to sin, toss it out. Smash it. It is worth mentioning and reminding ourselves here what sin is, as you might be scratching your head wondering about my suggestion that perhaps our use of technology could be called “sin,” particularly if I insist it means more than just the nature of the content.

What I mean by sin here, is that it is the missing the mark of us becoming and being fully human, fully alive. According to St Augustine, sin is “man turned in on himself.” What better phrase than this for the experience of being jury duty, as I have been this week, with a room of 160 or so people all silently bent over their devices.

Jesus said, “I have come that you may have life and have it abundantly, but the thief comes only to steal, kill and destroy.” I invite you to consider that this is not a neutral piece of technology. That maybe this has been our enemies most successful strategy to date. Each of us have to work out for ourselves what our red lines are, in conversation ideally with family and friends.

Practical turn

In the words of Ruth Gaskovski from her Substack *Pilgrims in the Machine*:

“Our time-saving devices have turned on us. Instead of offering us more of life, they are eating up large swaths of our day. We scroll to relax but feel more anxious and irritable. We’re entertained by people/places/ ideas that seem far more interesting than what is happening in our home. We have grown so accustomed to bite-sized highs that our ordinary life has flat-lined. We feel more alone because we spend most of time alone, staring at a screen.

In spite of our best intentions, we are never just quickly dipping online. We switch universes designed by “attention engineers” who hotwire casino psychology into social media feeds, delving dangerously near to black holes where time is literally warped.

Every time we turn our face toward a screen, we are sending a message to ourselves, our children, and anyone around us about which universe truly matters. And reality is losing.”

The question is how we can grow into life, and to remain grounded in the reality of life around us, and the limitations of our bodies.

When preparing a sermon, I always want to ask the question: what is the gospel, the good news of our faith in this. Where the gospel touches on this topic is the incarnation. The gospel is that the limitation of the human body is not something that needs to be transcended and overcome by technology. Self-control it is not about trying harder, overcoming limitations, gritting our teeth and being more moral. It is that the God who created the entire universe, so desired to be with us that he came to us in Christ Jesus, dwelt among us, made his home with us, and in doing so, embraced all our limitations to redeem them, to restore us, and to reconcile us all back to God.

The second way the gospel bears upon this is grace. What is our relationship with ourselves when we fail? When we fail to have self-control over our thoughts and actions that we want to see. When we eat that extra sweet treat, allow anger to overcome us, watch pornography or find ourselves scrolling mindlessly. How do we respond to failure? Do we exhibit the Fruit of the Spirit with ourselves? Do we treat ourselves with the same patience, kindness and gentleness we are called to show others? We do not see the growth we want to see by punishing ourselves but by loving ourselves, our bodies, remembering that Christ affirms the goodness of our bodies.

In conclusion, the challenge before us is to take seriously, very seriously, what is shaping us. Our hope is that this sermon series has provoked you into considering in advance what and how you will use technology. It may be that you are blissfully uninitiated with much that we have talked about. You never got a smart phone, or don't really understand all these apps and things. Praise the Lord. You have a calling. To pray.

If you are married, is your phone or technology causing problems in your marriage?

It may be that you are a parent, helping children, youth and young adults navigate this world. Perhaps you are modelling behaviours with your own use what is important: the reality around you or the hyper-real world within your device.

Maybe you are young in the room. I don't want to presume exactly what is shaping your life. But I invite you to seriously consider how your use of digital technology, reliance on AI or whatever it is; is shaping you in unforeseen ways.

I think the Church has a real opportunity here. To witness to a way of life to our family members, neighbours, friends, colleagues. Not through finger wagging or judgementalism. But through witnessing to a way of vibrant, zesty fully human, fully alive life!

That's the ultimate question before us: how do we become real human beings? It's the wisdom question: how do we not lose ourselves to the machine, to what enslaves us? Without intention and self-control, we willingly take the path of least resistance. we need self-control to take the hard path,

the narrow path. This future that we are presented by the technologists is not inevitable. Just because we can do something, does not mean we should. And as followers of Jesus, enthused by the Spirit for the sake of expressing the fruit of Spirit in this world. It is so easy to take the path of least resistance with new technologies. Christ challenges us: it is the narrow path, which requires self-control.