

Three Words Critical to Salvation

The salvation that Jesus has made available to us is so resplendent and so bounteous that it's nearly absurd to focus on just three words and say that they are critical, as if all the others aren't. But over the years in these lessons we've discussed most of the words associated with salvation, some repeatedly. Yet these three we seem to have somehow overlooked. Indeed, I suspect most believers overlook these three words, yet they are exceedingly important. So in this lesson let's focus on just these three. They are "self-control," "watch," and "fruit." I hope it will be evident at the end of the lesson that this is not merely an exercise in philology, because there's deep spiritual significance in it for every believer today.

I. Self-control is a characteristic of God. His covenant faithfulness and love for Israel in the presence of their inveterate rebellion and rejection of Him, His long-suffering, His postponement of wrath upon a world of unbelievers until a day in the future, His overlooking of sins by Gentiles until the Son came, His love for sinners even – all these (and lots more in the Scriptures) are tangible evidences of God's infinitely perfect self-control.

The Greek word translated into English as self-control is *enkrateia*. The word is used only 4 times in the entire New Testament. Yet it's one of the most important characteristics a believer must exhibit. We must be masters of ourselves. We have in our innate state desires and lusts for all manner of worldly and sinful things. We can only curb those appetites if we have self-control. It's only thru self-control that we can deny sinful ambition and the pursuit of power over others, and it's the only way we can refrain from quarreling and gossiping and being contentious. Self-control says "No" to sexual immorality, to idolatry, to greed and covetousness, to envies and jealousies, and to a host of other evils that, as a child of God, we're to eschew. Self-control allows us to be content with what God provides, to engage God in prayer, to serve Him as He's revealed we're to do that, and to love His Word.

Self-control comes to us by the empowering Spirit (Galatians 5:23). It's the self-control of God Himself manifested in our lives. Without that work of the Spirit, few of us can express it. Athletes in training, military people in training, farmers, neurosurgeons and certain others, exercise their own self-control. We, however, control self in the power of God.

When Paul was witnessing to Felix, the governor at Caesarea, about faith in Christ, he discoursed on "righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come" (Acts 24:25). Notice: Self-control is in the same category as righteousness and judgment! Commentators assert that Paul used that word only because Felix's core personal problem was his lack of self-control. Nonsense. It's here in the Word of God to instruct us. Peter says that self-control is one of the essential qualities we must have "in increasing measure to keep us from being ineffective and unproductive in our knowledge of our Lord Jesus" (2 Peter 1:6-8).

Self-control is not a gift! It's one of the most lovely and necessary aspects of the life of Jesus that's imparted to us. It's Jesus living in us, expressing Himself through us. But we have to be humble and yielded to Him, because He's too polite to impose Himself (see Revelation 3:20). In this massively over-developed world we inhabit today, saturated with distracting issues, ungodly pursuits, entertainment and idols to worship, we cannot possibly please God unless we're exhibiting self-control, that is, unless we're expressing Jesus in our lives.

II. "Watch" means to be vigilant. In the Hebrew Scriptures, we read that God watches over Israel to protect His beloved people (Isaiah 27:3). But in the Greek Bible, "watch" occurs a half dozen or so times meaning, "Be alert!" or "Be on guard!" It's a warning word because something impending is about to happen. The Greek word is *grēgoreō*. Some translators give it the idea of "wake up!" And that's OK because the opposite of being vigilant is being asleep.

Jesus sternly warned us, "Watch, for you do not know the day or the hour" of His return (Matthew 24:42 and again in 25:13). He ended His parable of the ten virgins with the dreadful, "I tell you the truth, I don't know you," referring to the five who weren't prepared for His return and so missed out on the great blessing of being at the wedding banquet, the Millennial Kingdom. I think that dispensational commentators err in claiming this parable and its warning refers only to Israel during the Tribulation; Matthew wrote it for the Church. The Return of Christ and participation in the coming Kingdom is to motivate us to being faithful stewards of all that God has invested in us. Peter likewise uses this word to sternly warn all believers, "Be sober-minded and vigilant. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8). In other words, "Don't be drunk or asleep, or you'll get caught and destroyed!" This is scary. We—all believers—must be ever on guard, alert, attentive to things, which means being spiritually insightful and discerning. We need to be able to see the devil in order to resist him. Paul used this word too. In Acts

20:31, he warned the elders at Ephesus to guard against false teachers who will distort truth. False doctrine is insidious! We need to be “on guard.” We foolishly leave theology to the experts; we’re *all* responsible for correct doctrine. And John too uses this word. In Revelation 3:2-3, we read, “Wake up!” Those in the Church at Sardis weren’t vigilant. They needed to assiduously attend to the Word of Christ and obey it, or else.

III. “Fruit” (Greek, *karpos*) occurs in a few verses that most of us are familiar with, yet I suspect we miss the significance of the word. Fruit grows and ripens in time, but only as nutrients flow into it from the vine or branch, up from the roots. Fruit comes only from what’s alive. Fruit is what’s desired, the purpose of the plant or tree, not just seeing a green vine or another tree. And God wants fruit, using the word in a metaphoric sense. Our lives are to be fruitful, i.e., full of fruit.

Fruit is the result of being spiritual, that is, living out the living Christ. Fruit reveals that we’re Jesus’ disciples, that we’re following Him, and that we’re obeying and serving Him. So I see two kinds of fruit: our Christ-like character, and the good works that we do. Both are produced by the indwelling Holy Spirit, not automatically but in synergy with us, that is, we will to obey the Word and the Spirit enables it to happen. The Spirit produces fruit in the life of the one who is committed to Christ and to doing His will; there’s no fruit in the life of the one who is indifferent and passive.

The fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) is what God imparts to believers by the indwelling Holy Spirit, making us like Christ. God’s own life, in other words, is imparted to believers, and the Spirit expresses it as we’re yielded to Him, as we obey the Word. These are not “good works,” nor are these “gifts.” They are the character of Jesus Himself living in us. There are 9 qualities or characteristics that make up this fruit. The first is love. This is a self-sacrificing love that seeks the blessing or good of the object of love, regardless whether that love is deserved and without realizing any benefit in return. It’s selfless love. The second is joy, or gladness. It causes us to rejoice in our salvation, in knowing God, and in the promises of a glorious future existence in God’s presence. The third is peace, and it’s because reconciliation has been made with God, who loves us, and with others of like faith with whom we’re joined together in love. It’s a resting in God’s goodness despite adversity because He’s promised us blessings in the future. The fourth is long-suffering, or faithfulness in spite of persecution or mistreatment. Whatever wrongs we must suffer, we can endure them and maintain our faith. The next is gentleness. We’re not harsh, mean or austere, but kind toward others. We have a pleasant disposition. Goodness is next. We seek to impart to others only that which is good, that which benefits them. Faithfulness is next. We’re good stewards of all that God has invested in us. The next is mildness or meekness. There’s no arrogance in a child of God, but instead humility and submission to His rule and will. And the last we’ve already discussed, self-control. All these together constitute one homogeneous whole, “fruit.”

In Isaiah Chapter 5, God complained that His nation, Israel, failed to bear good fruit for Him. They were supposed to express justice and righteousness by obeying the Law. Fruit in this Old Testament text refers to good works. In John Chapter 15, Jesus says that He is the new, ideal, obedient Israel (“I am the true vine”), and that we followers are branches in Him. And so we’re to bear fruit for God. We’re to pursue a life of *doing*. The fruit we bear, that is, the good works we do, demonstrate that we’re His disciples (15:8). In other words, for us, fruit is what results from serving Christ. In Jesus’ parable of the soils (Matthew 13), the “good soil” is the person whose response to the Gospel results in bountiful fruitfulness. Paul thus expected “fruit” from his work in Rome (Romans 1:13). Paul wrote to the Colossian believers, “that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way, bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God . . .” (1:10). Paul wrote similarly to the Philippian believers (1:10-11), “that you may be . . . filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.” Jesus said, “I chose you and appointed you to go and bear much fruit, fruit that will last” (15:16). John wrote this for the Church! It’s the purpose of our election. Paul states explicitly in Romans 7:4 that our salvation is “in order that we might bear fruit to God.”

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It should be evident that something is fundamentally wrong with the form of Christianity that we know today. There’s a huge disconnect between what we see and practice and what’s in Scripture. That’s because since Constantine the Church has an unbiblical clergy/laity distinction that the Protestant Reformation failed to address. So we feel secure in being passive laity, expecting the church’s professionals to do the work of Christ. We’re spectators! We’re not going to change the church’s structure, but we can all change our minds about our degree of commitment and become a biblical follower of Christ. We are all expected to do the work of Christ, to be Christ-like and to be obedient to God’s will. These three words reveal how deep and thorough-going the transformation must be that is needed. Yes, much personal sacrifice will be needed. But Jesus is worth it.