



**Monday Reflection:** Ed and I like to do the fruit of the Spirit in reverse order, making self-control the foundation and love the pinnacle. Really the fruit of the Spirit all boils down to love. The Bible tells us to let love be our highest goal.

*Let love be your highest goal!* 1 Corinthians 14: NLT

Joy, peace, kindness (etc) are all facets of love demonstrated toward ourselves and others. It is when we act from love that we look the most like Jesus. Demonstrating love for God, others and ourselves sums up all that is asked of us as Christians. ☺ Love is the most valuable commodity in the universe. Without free will there can be no love because love is a choice. It's God's greatest gamble that human beings can learn the supremacy of love that put the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the garden in the first place. Without any other option, we couldn't choose love. Love was worth the risk because love is THAT important. Love is who God is.

The foundation of love is self-control. When we are out of control it is impossible for us to act from love. Love is not our automatic setting. Love takes intention and effort. It doesn't happen by default. Love is a skill that must be learned and practiced. God has given us a lifetime to grow in love. This journey begins with a healthy understanding of what is in our control and what is not. Personally I'm not fond of translating this word as self-control or self-discipline, the two most common ways we read it. For some inexplicable reason they still haven't asked for Ed or my advice on any of the Bible translations. Go figure. The problem with the word control is that it's often associated with complete 100% control. There are things we have complete control over but not as many as we'd like. Most of us have control over whether or not we raise our right hand in most situations. Of course, not everyone has the use of their right arm. If Ed wanted to he could hold me tight enough to prevent me from raising my right hand. He'd have to run as soon as he let me go, but I bet he could do it. We usually have a high degree of control over our actions. They are our "responsibility" because we have been given the "ability" to choose our "responses." In the garden God called this power of the self - dominion.

We are choosers, impacters, creators, meaning makers and world changers. We inherited that from God. Once evil was thrown into the mix we became powerful forces for both good and evil. We have a dual nature, or dual citizenship between earth and heaven. We inherit some good and evil, and we're raised by other humans to have experienced both good and evil. Neither nature or nurture is up to us in the early days of life. But the longer we live, the more our lives and even our identities are shaped by our choices. New research about epigenetic tells us that our choices even influence how our DNA expresses itself. Self-management is extremely important if we want to be healthy. Each of us are in the process of creating our lives and training ourselves for our benefit or to our detriment. The term self-discipline is a bit better than the term self-control because the root meaning of discipline is "to train." Sadly many of us have learned to associate discipline with punishment. There have been Christians through the ages who have disciplined their bodies with whips trying to drive out their fleshly nature. But that seems kinda creepy to me.

Paul tells us that it is valuable to train our bodies but even more valuable to train our spirits.

Physical training is good, but training for godliness is much better, promising benefits in this life and in the life to come. 1 Timothy 4:8 (NLT)

A modern word for this process is conditioning. Our parents and society were in a position to condition us as children. As adults we are responsible for our own conditioning. It's up to us what we do, what we consume, what influences we expose ourselves to, how much we move and how long we rest. It's our responsibility how we manage stress from without and within. We don't have complete control over our thoughts, our feelings or our experiences, but it's up to us what we do with our thoughts and feelings. They belong to us. God created us to have stewardship over ourselves. Often times we try to manage our thoughts, feelings and actions by trying. But trying can never be as powerful as training. We are capable of about as many sit-ups as we've trained ourselves to do in our exercise practice. We know that physical conditioning is the foundation of athletic ability. Olympic metals are not won by trying alone. We practice conditioning because it works, not as a form of punishment. A coach may use a tough speech or drill to motivate here and there, but the best training inspires more than it demands compliance. Unreasonable expectations and critical judgements discourage more than they fuel growth. If we are bossy or pushy or critical with ourselves it will deplete the energy we need to make good choices.

The best options are win-win. We are all too familiar with competition, but harmony is God's nature. God is love. Love does what is most loving. What is most loving benefits everyone involved. We can't always figure out how to make that work down here, but self-promotion at someone else's expense is never love. Similarly, promoting someone else's benefit at our own expense isn't love either. Jesus is our mastery model in this, as in all things. We find Jesus making a few sacrifices in His lifetime, but only when it was beneficial to all. His ultimate sacrifice, death on a cross, was something His body desperately wanted to avoid. The reason that Jesus took that step was out of love for us, trust in His Father's will, and the glory that lay ahead.

Let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us. We do this by keeping our eyes on Jesus, the champion who initiates and perfects our faith. Because of the joy awaiting him, he endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God's throne. Think of all the hostility he endured from sinful people; then you won't become weary and give up. Hebrews 12:2-3 (NLT)

The cross would not feel like love, but it would result in an exponential increase in love in this world. Jesus knew that He was serving His long term benefit even in His short term sacrifice. A mother goes through labor out of love. It may involve pain but that is the only way to birth something new. Pain, that isn't absolutely necessary for some gain, is of no real value. In the Old Testament God told His people that He didn't want their sacrifices, He wanted their hearts. In the New Testament Paul puts it like this,

"So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life - your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life - and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him." (Romans 12:1 MES)

**Tuesday Reflection:** The process of self-conditioning takes place in layers. Yesterday we talked about Paul's teaching about the benefits of spiritual (and physical) conditioning. Our highest goal is to love God with all our hearts, souls, minds and strength and to love ourselves and others. In conditioning ourselves we need to provide training for all facets of our selves - heart, soul, mind and body. Today we begin with the spiritual self. Our spiritual selves need God's love. It is in receiving and betting on this love that we are inspired to transcend ourselves. As spiritual beings we long for harmony and community and satisfaction that is beyond our limited human nature. Love is the foundation for the motivation to do the right thing. We are open to doing things God's way when we are confident that He loves us, and has our best interests in mind. We are inspired to love ourselves and others because God first loved us. God is the origin and definition of love. Jesus came to earth to show us God's love up close and personal. Humans need a steady diet of love. We need to drink deeply from the fountain of living water and unconditional love:

*Jesus replied, "Anyone who drinks this water will soon become thirsty again. 14 But those who drink the water I give will never be thirsty again. It becomes a fresh, bubbling spring within them, giving them eternal life. John 4:13-14 (NLT)*

We need to breath it in to have spiritual life. In Genesis God breathes His spirit into Adam after forming him from earth. This bring him to life in way that is more powerful and more personal than the animals God created. But we still share many characteristics with other mammals. We are only capable of so much on our own. We want to do better only when we experience, or at least glimpse better. God shows us perfect love. His love is kind, gentle, consistent, firm, appropriate and extravagant. Jesus showed us the highest form of love when He gave His life for us. But He demonstrated love when He lived His life with us and for us:

*We know what real love is because Jesus gave up his life for us. So we also ought to give up our lives for our brothers and sisters. 1 John 3:16 (NLT)*

So how does this relate to self-control? I'm glad you asked. Let's look at a research experiment on self-control with children. The kids are each given an equal amount of spending money. They are shown catalogs of merchandise they might want at really reasonable prices. They are told that they can spend their money at any time, but that they will get the most for their money from these catalogs at the end of the experiment. Then they are then put in a Chuck E. Cheese like environment. There are games and snacks and cheap prizes, but all at highly inflated prices. It's kinda like the Palmer Fair. And although all of the kids have picked out things they REALLY want out of the catalog, the carnival atmosphere results in very few of them coming out with any money. We all underestimate the power of temptation when were not experiencing it. We tell ourselves that we want to eat healthy, that it's in our best interest to treat people as we want to be treated, and that it's worth it to go to bed at a decent hour. But when the time comes our good intentions often fall at the sheer force of temptation.

So what's the secret to having the willpower when it really matters? Researchers tell us that willpower comes in a very limited supply. We have it, and we can build it up, but it's really expensive. When we spend it, it's gone. In the experiment with the kids they interviewed them afterwards. The kids who had spent all there money lamented about how

overwhelming the temptations had been. The few kids who came out with money said that it took focusing on the thing they really wanted to buy at the end to resist the temptation of the environment. A couple of the temptation “resisters” stuck together to encourage each other not to spend (or limit spending). The biggest resister described talking himself through the experiment, reassuring himself that although it was hard to resist, the prize would be worth it. The Bible gives several examples of people talking themselves through things. David asked himself why he was so down-hearted.

*Why am I discouraged? Why is my heart so sad? I will put my hope in God! I will praise him again--my Savior and my God! Psalm 43:5 (NLT)*

When we talk to ourselves like this it is our spiritual self that does the reassuring. Humans are designed to develop the ability to pause in our tempting environment. This empowers us to take a step back, and align our behavior with goals and values. It isn't easy but it's possible. We gain this ability as our frontal lobe reaches maturity in our early 20s. Children are not capable of as highly developed objectivity. The self that provides self-control hasn't fully developed yet. That's why children need adults to set limits, teach values, and encourage consequential thinking. The ideal parent listens to the feelings, thoughts, desires and temptations of the child without judgement. After this validation the child is better equipped to consider actions, options and consequences. Parents also set up limits and additional consequences to motivate actions that are more consistent with family values.

Our spiritual self can condition our bodies, hearts and minds. This self-conditioning looks a lot like effective parenting. The compassionate self listens and empathizes. When the spiritual self has been fueled by God's love there is more internal patience and gentleness. We can encourage consequential thinking and listen to our feelings without being swept away by them. We can acknowledge our racing hearts and ask ourselves to take a deep breath before moving forward. This kind of self-stewardship grows with practice.

*Don't you realize that in a race everyone runs, but only one person gets the prize? So run to win! All athletes are disciplined in their training. They do it to win a prize that will fade away, but we do it for an eternal prize. So I run with purpose in every step. I am not just shadowboxing. I discipline my body like an athlete, training it to do what it should. Otherwise, I fear that after preaching to others I myself might be disqualified. 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 (NLT)*

It provides an internal rapport that promotes harmony, just like God lives in harmony between the Father, the Spirit and the Son. The spiritual self can hold on to the lessons we've learned, the positive examples we've seen and the wisdom that God has shared with us. But just like an earthly parent can “lose it” when they aren't taking care of themselves, our spiritual self needs to bask in God's care to be resourceful when it really matters. About 10% (I'm making these percentages up by the way) of self-control is the spiritual self coaching the rest of the self through the heat of the temptation. This is will power. The other 90% is all in the prep work. We need to be conditioning ourselves on a daily basis if we want the will power to be there when we really need it. It's the sweat in daily practice that provides the

edge in the big game. Tomorrow we'll talk about how the spiritual self can condition the rest of us so that the strength is there when we really need it.

**Wednesday Reflection:** Today we go from the pinnacle of the pyramid (like Maslow's hierarchy of needs) to its base. At the top we have the most mature part of the self, the spiritual self. When the Israelites refused to enter the promised land, only the adults lost their privileges to enter the land 40 years later. Children haven't developed the capacity (dominion) to be held fully responsible for their choices. The spiritual self has to develop. Actually, it doesn't HAVE to. We are given the opportunity for the development of our spiritual selves. Many adults refuse this sense of ownership over their actions. Maturity doesn't develop without our cooperation. Our bodies we simply inherit, on the other hand. We're born with the base of the pyramid - the body. We can't love God (or anyone else) if we have no strength (power). Without appropriate care for our bodies we become powerless. The body can only last (at the most) months without food, weeks without sleep, days without water, and minutes without oxygen.

The physical self needs a shepherd. The Bible describes people who are lost, weak, exploited, sick or vulnerable as sheep without a shepherd. Sheep need support. They lack the ability to care for themselves properly. That's why the 23rd Psalm resonates so much with us:

*The Lord is my shepherd; I have all that I need. He lets me rest in green meadows; he leads me beside peaceful streams. He renews my strength. He guides me along right paths, bringing honor to his name. Even when I walk through the darkest valley, I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me. Your rod and your staff protect and comfort me. You prepare a feast for me in the presence of my enemies. You honor me by anointing my head with oil. My cup overflows with blessings. Surely your goodness and unfailing love will pursue me all the days of my life, and I will live in the house of the Lord forever. Psalm 23:1-6 (NLT)*

All of us are born like sheep - dependent on others for our basic needs. We can't feed ourselves, protect ourselves or rest ourselves. Babies cannot survive without a caregiver. In childhood this responsibility falls to the parent(s). If the parents are unable to care for the child, the state tries to intervene to provide substitute care. The human brain and body simply can't develop without it. A good shepherd doesn't expect its sheep to outgrow this need for care. As adults our bodies are not much more sophisticated than they were when we were young. The responsibility for care has just shifted from the parent to the self (the inner parent or spiritual self). Our bodies are completely dependent on us. If we deprive ourselves of food, rest water or oxygen our very cells will suffer. It's our responsibility to keep ourselves reasonably safe, rested and fed. Jesus came to set the bar for human shepherding. He was gentle with the vulnerable and sought out the lost, even those who had "gone astray" (were lost because of their own poor choices). He fed the multitudes and healed the sick. He didn't neglect the needs of human bodies in favor of human spirits. Jesus knew that the body and soul are a package deal. The 23rd Psalm is a beautiful description of Jesus shepherding us. He provides not only rest and food but comforting. We can feel safe and loved even when traveling through dark environments.

The body learns by association. Hungry=discomfort. Full=satisfied. Reassured=safe. A trusted parent can scoop a toddler up from a fall and make it "all better" even while the scrape on the knee still hurts. In John 10 Jesus tells us that He is the Good Shepherd who loves His sheep. He even lays His life down for the protection of His sheep:

*I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd sacrifices his life for the sheep... "I am the good shepherd; I know my own sheep, and they know me, just as my Father knows me and I know the Father. So I sacrifice my life for the sheep. John 10:11-14 (NLT)*

When we experience this love we learn to associate Jesus' voice with safety, satisfaction and rest. He doesn't lay anything on us that is ill-fitting or too weighty. (Matt) He is our safety zone when we are worn out or heavily burdened. People tend to treat each other (and ourselves sometimes) more like sheep dogs. We nip and bark when someone steps out of line. But Jesus invites our spiritual selves into sheep 101, the mastery course on shepherding. The first lesson is that sheep will always be sheep. Our bodies will always need our care. If we aren't willing to care for ourselves we will become powerless. As we care for our bodies, we build strength and inner rapport. As we experience Jesus' compassion for us we begin to feel loved. In one animal trial they took baby monkeys away from their mothers (sad face) and put them in a cage with two replacement care givers. One was a machine that provided milk and the other was more like a big stuffed animal. Although the baby monkeys consistently visited the milk machine mother to meet their survival needs, they consistently ran to the soft monkey mother when they felt threatened. Jesus lamented that He longed to gather the Israelites up like a hen gathers her chicks.

*O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones God's messengers! How often I have wanted to gather your children together as a hen protects her chicks beneath her wings, but you wouldn't let me. Matthew 23:37 (NLT)*

He offers the same service to us if we'll listen. Jesus knew rear self-conditioning begins when the spiritual self takes responsibility for the physical self. Our thoughts and feelings can't be reasoned with if we have not been provided with reasonable amounts of food, rest and safety. It's part of our spiritual training program to learn to care for our bodies. If we can't trust ourselves to sleep or eat we can't trust ourselves not to lose our tempers. Self conditioning starts with the body and moves up the pyramid. Our task is to align our care of our physical selves with the example set by the Good Shepherd. We are apprentice shepherds. Self neglect is never spiritual. You will still find shepherds leading their sheep with their voices in the part of the world Jesus lived in. If you see someone driving sheep (herding them roughly) you aren't looking at a shepherd. You're looking at a butcher.

**Thursday Reflection:** Today we add our emotional selves to the physical selves we talked about yesterday. Both the heart and the body interact and inform each other. It is the job of the spiritual self to encourage harmony in these interactions. An inner parent can see the needs of both our bodies and our hearts. Our emotional selves need a counselor. Developmentally we are born with physical selves and next develop our emotional selves. The brain stem is fully intact at birth providing instincts, appetites and defense mechanisms. The task of the toddler is to add significance to her sensory input. The brain develops positive

and negative associations and learns to assign meaning to different experiences. Emotions are also social in nature. A baby is only born with two fears - the fear of falling and a startle response to noises. All other fears are learned. We are taught what we need to protect ourselves from (a hot stove) by care givers and by experiences. At some point every child will attempt something that results in pain. No caregiver can keep the child 100% safe. We all learn some lessons the hard way. Children with attentive parents have the opportunity to learn life's lessons without the damage that accompanies such knowledge for neglected kids. The emotional self doesn't replace the physical self. Emotion simply takes our physical experiences to a more advanced level. A baby knows the frustration of not being well rested. A kindergartener feels the same frustration but attributes his responses to what's going on in his environment. He seeks to label his discomfort in order to gain a sense of control over it. For example, the feeling of butterflies in the stomach is exciting for Suzie when she's going down the slide. The same physical sensations feel like fear when they arise in response to a growling dog. This new emotional information is integrated into the previous physical data. Emotions tell us if we are okay or not, and compel us to sound the alarm when we are not.

Yesterday we talked about baby monkeys running to their soft monkey mothers when they felt threatened. Parents of babies soothe with touch, sound and rhythm. Mothers rock, feed, pat and hold. All babies need to be comforted. As children age the parent adds words of reassurance to these physical comforts. With further development a child will address himself with these words when the parent isn't present. When our nephew Zale was small he fearlessly tried to keep up with his older cousins. After face planting off the play land slide his most common response was "I'm okay!" This served to reassure adults (and himself) that he didn't "need" any soothing. He was a "big boy" and didn't want to be rescued from his enthusiasm. We try to explain our experiences to ourselves and others. Many of these explanations and reassurances are learned from an adult model. As Zale got older I found myself horrified to overhear Jonathan when he would attempt to correct Zale in some folly. The condescending tone sounded like an unflattering mimicry of my own. Young children are in the process of experiencing and labeling their emotions. The Disney movie ??? serves as a frame of reference for kids (and adults) to understand their own joy, sadness, disgust, anger and fear. Children can feel overwhelmed by their emotional experiences. Parents and teachers serve to reassure the child that emotions are normal and that there are things we can do about them. We're not all alone at their mercy. Sometimes life doesn't feel so good, but we can still be okay.

In Jesus' day children had little to no rights or social value. It makes sense that when kids started to approach Jesus, His disciples would drive the immature creatures away. Jesus was "too important" in their eyes to be approached by children. I can't even imagine how uncomfortable the disciples would be at Riverside! But Jesus scolded the disciples and welcomed the children: He didn't attempt to teach the kids or correct them (like He did the disciples). He blessed them:

One day some parents brought their children to Jesus so he could lay his hands on them and pray for them. But the disciples scolded the parents for bothering him. But Jesus said, "Let the children come to me. Don't stop them! For the Kingdom of

Heaven belongs to those who are like these children." And he placed his hands on their heads and blessed them before he left. Matthew 19:14 (NLT)

He expressed acceptance, affection and reassurance. He knew that young children need a counselor not a critic. Jesus was often judged for His compassion for immature adults as well. When dealing with the vulnerable sinner Jesus demonstrated acceptance and reassurance. He was unprecedentedly (I just made that word up ;o) approachable. It's not that Jesus never corrected the sinner, as parents correct their young children. It was that He expected children to act like children, and sinners to act like sinners. They were not condemned for their immaturity. People caught up in sin are often emotionally vulnerable. They need support in order to find the courage to improve. They long for someone to tell them that they are worth all the hard work it will take to recover their spiritual health. Acknowledging our emotions, and what they're trying to tell us, is the first step in moving through them. Anger isn't sinful in and of itself. The Bible never says to avoid anger totally- rather it gives this advice:

And "don't sin by letting anger control you." Don't let the sun go down while you are still angry, for anger gives a foothold to the devil. Ephesians 4:26 (NLT)

Anger isn't a sin. Hitting your brother over the head with a rock (literally or verbally) is a sin. We move forward proactively when we counsel ourselves emotionally. This puts us in a better frame of mind to choose actions that reflect our values. Responding slave-like to our emotions depletes our personal power. Self-control counsels the emotional self and conditions the physical self.

**Friday Reflection:** The Bible tells us that there's a way that seems right to us, but in the end it leads to death.

There is a path before each person that seems right, but it ends in death.  
Proverbs 14:12 (NLT)

We try to use our best judgement, but our thinking will always fall short of God's thinking. Just because we think something doesn't make it true. About 80% of my thoughts on any given day simply don't serve me. Our brains are biased. Our thinking often reverts to stereotypes or outdated maps of reality. Our minds need a coach. Jesus spent 3 and a half years with His disciples (students/apprentices) teaching them how to conceptualize the kingdom of God. He modeled for them what life's really about. He set an example, coached them through problems, and answered their questions. He expected their earthly thinking to be somewhat stuck about the things that really matter. It would be one thing if we could recognize how much we don't know. But the most dangerous thinking, as a contemporary of Mark Twain asserted, "is what we know that just ain't so." When we think we have all the answers is when we are most blind to what we've missed. We have a lot of automatic thoughts that bubble up and then defend themselves when they are questioned. To move beyond human understanding to God's wisdom requires that we hold our judgements with a grain of salt.

The Bible also teaches that we can know a tree by its fruit.

You can identify them by their fruit, that is, by the way they act. Can you pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? A good tree produces good fruit, and a bad tree produces bad fruit. A good tree can't produce bad fruit, and a bad tree can't produce good fruit. Matthew 7:14-16 (NLT)

Unhealthy thinking produces inferior fruit (results) and diminishes our opportunities. Healthy thinking produces beneficial results that feed us and those around us. The spiritual self has the power to press the pause button on current thinking to ask where it might lead us. We need to run a cost-benefit analysis on many of our thoughts rather than blindly reacting to our immediate assessment of the situation. This is called consequential thinking. We can encourage ourselves to set aside our current knee-jerk answer to imagine how things might end up if we continue on our automatic thinking path. Resourceful thinking takes energy and practice. Often we must catch ourselves in the same unhelpful thought many times before we begin to build better thought paths. The spiritual self can act as a library of resources and wisdom learned from God and reality. Like a good parent we can ask ourselves how we really want to move forward in our actions. Aligning our path with God's values and character takes a lot of mental course correction, but nothing less will deliver the lives we long for. We often think thoughts that are impatient, unkind, harsh, negative, frustrated and fearful. Our minds and emotions gang up together and build on each other. Patience, kindness, gentleness, goodness, joy and peace are not our automatic settings. Our brains are wired to search for problems and threats. This automatic negative thinking can contribute to our survival but it seldom makes life a joy.

Immature human thinking isn't wrong. It's par. It just can't deliver the lives we want. We have the option to trade up, to try to contemplate things from God's point of view. Jesus came to teach us how to develop His character and wisdom in our lives. We learn from His teachings and His example. We also learn more resourceful thinking patterns from secondary teachers in our lives. Paul wasn't Jesus. His thinking was just as likely as ours to go astray. The benefit here is that we can watch Paul course correct when his thinking isn't serving him. In Philippians 4:6-9 Paul walks us through his mental reframing when his mind is consumed with worry:

*Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything; tell God your needs, and don't forget to thank him for his answers. 7 If you do this, you will experience God's peace, which is far more wonderful than the human mind can understand. His peace will keep your thoughts and your hearts quiet and at rest as you trust in Christ Jesus.*

*Philippians 4:6-7 (NLT)*

He doesn't scold himself for his worry. He reframes his concerns as prayers. He cultivates peace by focusing on what is good, noble, and admirable. He redirects his anxious mind with thoughts that serve him and inspire him. This process isn't easy or natural, but it's possible. Because of neuroplasticity, our brains can be retrained. We can coach our minds.

I don't know about you, but when I think of shepherding my body, counseling my emotions and retraining (coaching) my mind - I can feel a little overwhelmed. Who knew being human was gonna be this much work? I want the prize but the daily workouts can get old. I just never seem to get where I want to be. Like Paul, I'm never going to arrive. Life is a long and

complicated journey. The good news is that God isn't impatient with us. He loves us just where we are. He nudges us to take the step He's put in front of us rather than overthink the big picture. I am encouraged to give up my own impatience by noticing how ineffective it so often is. My motto is baby steps, baby. We'll continue this emphasis on small tools, steps and practice next week when we talk about gentleness. A jack-manner is a powerful tool, but we expect our dentist to use something more sophisticated and precise. When it comes to true power, often less is more.