

Self-Control

Matthew Myer Boulton

Christian Theological Seminary, Indianapolis, Indiana

The word itself is a false start. In twenty-first-century North American English, *self-control* is often associated with will power and restraint, particularly in the face of temptations to indulge or act recklessly in one way or another. We hear it invoked in connection with decadent desserts, for example, or managing a hot temper. And while this kind of self-regulation is surely included within the range of what Paul means by *egkrateia* in Galatians 5:23, that range is considerably broader and deeper—so much so, in fact, that the translation “self-control” carries a risk of steering us away from what Paul has in mind.

There are at least three related reasons for this. First, the term “self-control” can seem to assign the decisive locus of agency to the human “self”—whereas the drift of Paul’s overall argument is that the decisive locus of agency belongs to the Spirit, or rather to the Spirit-in-intimate-relation-with-the-human-self, such that a human being “lives by the Spirit.” Second, “self-control” can seem to suggest a mode of ongoing human achievement—whereas for Paul, *egkrateia* is a graceful divine gift, and in that sense a mode of ongoing divine generosity and human reception. And third, “self-control” provides little if any hint of the Spirited anthropology at the heart of Paul’s thought, and in particular, of the ways in which the call to Christian life is a call to freedom and communion. In what follows, I explore these three interwoven ideas.

Living by the Spirit

Egkrateia derives from two roots: *en* (“in” or “in the realm of”) and *kratos* (“strength” or “dominion”). “Inner strength” would be as fitting a translation as any, pointing toward an underlying idea of something like “gumption,” “steadfastness,” “courage,” or “resolve.” This alternative already moves in a quite different direction than “self-control,” since it lays the emphasis not on resisting temptation but rather on fortitude and vigor. The spotlight, we might say, moves from the horse’s bridle to the strength of the horse’s stride.

Likewise, “inner dominion” opens up a wider avenue of thought than “self-control,” invoking an idea of “being in command of one’s faculties” as opposed to being able merely to restrain oneself. “Inner discipline” opens another door, particularly given the ways in which “discipline” can connote both mastery and instruction. And still another potential valence here derives from the fact that the Greek prefix *en* can mean not only “in” but also “in the realm of.” Read this way, *egkrateia* may suggest not so much “inner strength/dominion” as “being in the realm of strength/dominion,” or to shift the metaphor, being in tune with a broader song or symphony or tapping in to a wider flow of power. Like sailboats on a windswept lake, if we move forward gracefully, we do so not only because of something within us, but also and primarily because of something we are within.

There is no telling, of course, precisely how the term resonated in Paul’s context, and *egkrateia* only occurs four times in the New Testament, each time in a kind of list. But the Epistle to the Galatians itself provides a rich backdrop, and Paul’s over-

all argument lends support to the lines of interpretation just outlined. His theme is Christian freedom, and the opening line of Galatians 5 sounds an exhortative note that freedom requires, above all, inner strength: “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit to the yoke of slavery” (Gal 5:1). The Christians in Galatia, in Paul’s view, are at risk of losing their way in conflict and confusion, and even as Paul makes his own contribution to the unfolding debate, he also calls on his readers and hearers to use the freedom to which they have been called not for “biting and devouring one another” but rather for the sake of love and concord. In this context, he introduces a pivotal contrast: on one hand, “living by the Spirit” (which leads to love and concord), and on the other hand, “gratifying the desires of the flesh” (which leads to confusion, conflict, and ultimately destruction). For Paul, true Christian freedom is only possible through living by the Spirit; and conversely, engaging in “the works of the flesh” is in fact, he insists, a form of slavery, the very predicament from which Christ has called the Galatians to be free.

In effect, Paul is raising the stakes of the conflict in Galatia by framing it in epic, soteriological terms. The laundry list of vices he calls “the works of the flesh” contains all manner of misbehavior, but at the heart of the list, bookended by sins of sex and appetite, are the kinds of problems central to Paul’s concerns in the epistle as a whole: “enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissension, factions, envy” (Gal 5:20-21). These are the vices uppermost in Paul’s mind in this correspondence, and accordingly, the “fruit of the Spirit” to which he contrasts these vices are themselves social phenomena that cultivate harmony: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control [*egkrateia*]” (Gal 5:22-23). Indeed, it is perhaps a measure of the Christian fascination with sexuality in recent decades, in North America and elsewhere, that it would even occur to us to interpret *egkrateia* primarily in opposition to, say, “fornication and licentiousness” rather than in opposition to the “quarrels and dissension” that so concern the apostle in this letter.

Understanding *egkrateia* as “inner strength” can help. In fact, if we end the list of the fruit of the Spirit this way (“generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and inner strength”), new interpretive possibilities emerge. The concluding item of a list can be rhetorically crucial: it can culminate, emphasize, sum up, reveal, or reframe the entire list. In this case, one possibility is that Paul means to end his list with the idea that such things as “love, joy, peace, and patience” require strength and resolve—a reading supported by Paul’s opening appeal that the Galatians “stand firm” and remain free in the face of encroaching forces of slavery. Put another way, freedom requires struggle, and struggle requires strength. To love is no light thing. To be peaceful is no light thing. Each requires a vigor deeper than the muscles of the body. That is, each requires “inner strength.”

And so the Spirit provides *egkrateia* as a virtue underlying all the others, a deep stamina that makes the rest of the list possible. But this stamina is no feat of Christian excellence; it is a divine gift and a function of the intimacy with the Spirit—“living by the Spirit”—that the Spirit herself initiates and sustains. This is not the fruit of Christian discipleship. It is the fruit of the Spirit. Should the Lord provide, this fruit may and will be involved in Christian discipleship, but always and only as the Spirit’s fruit. If we possess these benefits, we do so according to something like the ancient practice of usufruct, the legal right of using and enjoying the fruits or profits of something belonging to another.

When Paul writes of vices, he uses the phrase “works of the flesh,” underlining that these are *our* works, things *we* do at our own peril. But the contrasting list he calls not “works” but “fruit”—of the Spirit, yes, but even the term “fruit” moves the mind in a very different direction than “works.” Fruit arise out of the earth; we may plant seeds or give the plants water, but only God provides the growth (cf. 1 Cor 3:6-7). We don’t effect fruit, much less “do” them; we can only receive and enjoy them. The phrase “fruit of the Spirit” is therefore a double warning: first, that we should not understand them to be our works (they are “fruit”), and second, that we should not understand them to be ours in any case (they are “of the Spirit”).

Translating *egkrateia* as “self-control” can mislead us into overlooking these key features of Paul’s case, mistakenly assigning the decisive locus of agency to the human “self” supposedly controlling and being controlled. Like the young Luther, Christian disciples can be drawn by this line of thought into a downward spiral of self-chasing-self, a contorted death-grip of alleged regulation and rebellion, law and lawlessness. To the contrary, in Galatians Paul paints a picture of being “led by the Spirit” (Gal 5:18) in a way that releases us from this tortured relation with the law. For Paul, the full and free human being is indwelt by the Spirit, sustained in the Spirit, challenged by the Spirit, strengthened by the Spirit. In this sense, the full and free human being continuously receives and enjoys the fruits of the Spirit. In short, she lives by the Spirit, and in a real sense this entails a fundamental departure from death-dealing forms of “self-control.”

Spirited Anthropology

As Paul conceives them, these ideas are by no means for Galatians alone, or for Jews alone or indeed for any particular subset of humanity. Paul is an apostle, an evangelist sent to the nations. As far as he is concerned, this account of law and freedom, love and envy, enmity and inner strength—is epic in scope. He paints a portrait here of Christian freedom, but also of human freedom. We are created to “live in the Spirit.” For Paul, to live in the Spirit is to be fully and freely human.

But how does a person’s “love,” “joy,” or “inner strength” belong to her on one level and yet at the same time be a “fruit of the Spirit” continuously originating in God? Even the phrase “living by the Spirit” itself raises this kind of question: What does it mean to live in a way that our vitality itself is somehow shared, such that we live “by” or “through” another life not our own?

Here we arrive at a great mystery at the heart of Paul’s thought, according to which genuine human life is lived in and through divine life. Just a few chapters earlier, he puts it this way, “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20). Or again, in his sermon to the Athenians, he describes God in similar terms, “In him we live, and move, and have our being” (Acts 17:28). Again and again, Paul contends that the actual human situation is a kind of spiritual symbiosis, such that we live in and through a mystical, intimate dependence on God the creator, on Christ, and on the Spirit. For Paul, this is the truth about Christian freedom, but it is nonetheless the truth about human freedom more generally and about human being itself.

Indeed, we may be particularly well-positioned today to conceive these theological poetics in light of recent scientific discoveries of how prevalent symbiosis is in the world, and in particular in our own bodies. We tend to spend our days thinking of ourselves as independent creatures, and yet our health and wellbeing depend on

a microbial community—a microbiome on and within each of us—that, were it to be gathered together, would weigh as much as six pounds! The more we learn about human biology, the more we recognize the symbiotic character of our lives; and likewise, the more we learn about the natural world, the more we recognize the interconnected, symbiotic character of the “macrobiome” as well. Paul’s theological account of human being, informed as it is by another worldview altogether, nevertheless points in a similar analogical direction. Human life and divine life are not separate phenomena, he insists. We live and move and exist in God. Saved from the perils of sin, we live, not us, but Christ in us. Freed by Christ for freedom, we are called to live by the Spirit.

Exactly what kind of “inner strength” then is this? It is not a clenched fist, but rather an open, human hand. Its exertion is also reception. It is our inner strength, but at a deeper level it is the strength of the Spirit flowing in us and through us. In this sense it is a participation in the Spirit’s vitality and vigor. It is within us, but it is also something we are within.

And so we return to the Greek prefix *en* and the fact that it can mean not only “in” but also “in the realm of.” Accordingly, *egkrateia* may also be understood as being situated, by the grace of God, in the flow of the Spirit’s strength and dominion, playing a part in the ongoing divine symphony all around us. Just as authors and musicians sometimes speak of their art coming to them or through them, just as the well-known Franciscan prayer asks God to “make me an instrument of your peace,” so Paul’s Spirited anthropology invites us to understand our “inner strength” as at the same time a larger strength we are within, like a surfer borne by waves to the shore or a sailboat carried along by the breeze. Here is a supple, open-ended, relational, responsive form of dominion. It is not solitary; rather, it is a profoundly intimate form of strength in and with God. It is strength-together. Even at our core, even our very life force, our life blood, our strength, the energy and vigor by which we live our days—even at this deepest level of who we are, God is with us. In the end, *egkrateia* is a form of divine-human intimacy, a great mystery recalling Jesus’ beautiful words in the Gospel of John: “Abide in me, as I abide in you” (Jn 15:4). And this great and radiant mystery, Paul declares, is a fruit of the Spirit.