

August 26-30, 2024 Edition

Following
The Year^(s) Of ^Jesus Part 139
The Wisdom of Self Control

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When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well you knew the rest ;0) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday:

Once you were dead because of your disobedience and your many sins. You used to live in sin, just like the rest of the world, obeying the devil—the commander of the powers in the unseen world. He is the spirit at work in the hearts of those who refuse to obey God. Ephesians 2:1-3 (NLT)

But the Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against these things! Galatians 5:22-23 (NLT)

As you learn more and more how God works, you will learn how to do your work. We pray that you'll have the strength to stick it out over the long haul—not the grim strength of gritting your teeth but the glory-strength God gives. It is strength that endures the unendurable and spills over into joy, thanking the Father who makes us strong enough to take part in everything bright and beautiful that he has for us. Colossians 1:12 (MES)

Reflection: Human beings are creatures of choice. Sure, nature and nurture have their say, but what sets us apart from the animals is that we are MORE than nature and nurture. We are choosers. Our choices (the good, the bad and the ugly) have a tremendous impact in our lives, and the lives of those around us. Last weekend we talked about the two different operating systems that humans can choose to run their lives on. Today we are going to take a second look at this concept in terms of economies.

We exist in the environment of an earthly economy, made by man, and subject to the fears and desires of the human race. In this economy, supply determines demand. The scarcity mentality reminds us that resources are finite and precious. If we would have our share, we must do so in competition with the natural world and with each other. Our gain may have to be achieved at the expense of others because realistically, supply will run out. It is the strongest that survive and prosper. Force and coercion are tools used by the powerful. Those who make demands and take advantage will be rewarded with a greater share. It is eat or be eaten in the earthly economy.

But this economy takes its toll on relationships. Somehow it is hard to establish rapport and partnership while demanding our rights, taking our fair share, or resorting to intimidation and coercion. This realization, combined with the human drive for connection, requires a great deal of strategy and effort to have what we require and still be in relationships. Education and laws encourage us to pass for civilized, at least until people get their lives and resources so tangled up with ours that they find it too costly to untangle themselves. It's like walking a tightrope, this existence driven by our needs and impulses and desires.

But there is a higher economy, a heavenly economy, the economy of the Kingdom of Heaven, where His Spirit nourishes and rewards a different way of life. When we plant the seeds of

doing life God's way, we grow a harvest of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self control. It is the opposite result of living in the world's economy which produces individualism, distrust, worry, force, hardness, scarcity, selfishness, coercion and demanding. It cultivates a different kind of strength, the kind that comes from connection and trust, not from gritting our teeth and pushing forward. It's an economy based on the choice to believe that the power of love and wholeness and commitment to what's sacred is stronger than the power of force and coercion and competition.

Did you ever see the second Indiana Jones movie? There is a fountain that if one drinks from it with the Holy Grail then that person will live forever. But there are lots of grails in the cave... the villain is told to choose wisely because a wrong choice will lead to the opposite of what he seeks (turns out he'll go from human to zombie to dust in the space of about 15 seconds).

I'll never forget the words of the keeper of the Holy Grail after the villain picks the wrong cup, drinks and dies a spectacular and gruesome death.

He chose... poorly.

A similar choice sits before you today. Both of the economies that we've been talking about are available to us. And we will reap the results of whichever economy we choose to cultivate in our lives. One is all around us, demanding our attention, insisting that we will lose if we do not fight for what we want and need. The other sits quietly, just outside of the human line of vision, waiting for us to give it a chance and see what God's reward might be. What will be your choice? I hope you choose wisely... not poorly.

Prayer: Father, today I want to choose wisely. Teach me what it means to live "by the Spirit". Remind me when I switch over to the operating system of my sinful nature. I want to develop the character of Jesus. Show me what that means. In Jesus' Name, amen.

Tuesday:

A person without self-control is like a city with broken-down walls.

Proverbs 25:28 (NIV)

They said to me, "Things are not going well for those who returned to the province of Judah. They are in great trouble and disgrace. The wall of Jerusalem has been torn down, and the gates have been destroyed by fire." Nehemiah 1:3 (NLT)

Reflection: In this series we begin with the last virtue listed in the fruit of the spirit – self control. Our society understands the powerful role of self control in our lives. Without it we experience a loss of control, a feeling of being out of control, a sense of putting at risk our freedom and dignity, and wrestling from us our ability to choose. We hate to be in the position of being a slave or victim of someone else's control. And we can end up hating

ourselves if we allow our appetites or emotions to enslave us, rendering us a victim to our own roller coaster of highs and lows.

Roller coasters can be fun... as long as they don't spin us into a place where we lose control (of our emotions and our equilibrium... a little bit of the "out of control" can be a fun thing... to much and you'll find yourself wishing you could curl up in a ball and die but I digress...).

The desire for self control is not unique to Christians. Having self control provides the kind of freedom and protection that a wall provided around ancient cities. Self control says, "You cannot claim control over me because I have put in the efforts to be strong and safe and govern myself." Without it we feel overtly vulnerable and on guard. The Greeks considered self control to be the most important human quality. Without it man is forced to live like the animals, with no mastery or human dignity. For the Greek Stoic, self control was considered the highest and most fundamental achievement. Self control was valued for its own sake, and for the sake of pride in one's self and one's ability to govern one's own appetites.

But for the Christian, self control is only one facet of life in the Spirit. It is a virtue that must be fully integrated with the other characteristics of God's kingdom – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness and gentleness. Self control thrives when it is put in the service of God. Like the hero who puts himself in danger in his conviction to save another, this outward focus on something higher and bigger than the self fuels profound courage. It cultivates community and connection. It isn't self control for its own sake. That gets tiresome. And it's not self control for the benefit of the self because in our most desperate moments we often do not find ourselves compelling enough to provide powerful enough motivation to follow through.

When Nehemiah led the Israelites to rebuild the wall of Jerusalem it was a team effort. He partnered the power and inspiration of God with a community freshly motivated to work and sweat on behalf of their goal. Everyone was brought together to do their part. Each person had to summon the courage to participate, against all odds, in something that would be a triumph for them all.

It is human nature to build walls. We are driven to protect and define ourselves. But walls built by human hands and minds often shut out as many blessings as they do dangers. When we partner with God to build, we have a higher and more integrated standard for each stone we select, each step we take. We can have confidence that the self control that God has in mind for us will not shut others out, or make us strong at the expense of anyone else. It will not make us proud or unapproachable. Instead it will be only one beautiful facet of a remarkable life in community with God and man. Our lives will reflect the harmony and wholeness that exists in God Himself... that's the point of living life in step with the Spirit of God. It makes us something we could never have become on our own.

Prayer: Father, teach me how to tear down the walls that I have built around my heart that are toxic and destructive... and then teach me how to build Your kind of wall around the seed bed of my heart so that I can start living a life where, as I make You the Master of my life, You give me the strength to master my sinful nature. In Jesus' Name, amen.

Wednesday:

There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.
Proverbs 14:12

For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. Matthew 16:25 (NIV)

Seek the Kingdom of God above all else, and live righteously, and he will give you everything you need. Matthew 6:33 (NLT)

Reflection: The trail that Jesus blazed is so counterintuitive, it can almost seem absurd. If you really want to find yourself, Jesus claims, you must lose yourself. If you really want to be your best self, you must take your focus off your self entirely. Faithfulness trumps what seems right to us in our attempts at right living. And if we want a lot of things to go well for us, we will focus on only one.

A crucial part of self control is having the vision necessary to set aside what is urgent (&/or indulgent) in favor of what is sacred. God's kingdom must be very real in our minds for that to happen. The urgent/indulgent things in life are loud and vivid and demanding. They are often right in front of us, doing their best to gain our complete attention. God's kingdom is much more subtle. We have to choose to focus on the sacred, it will not scream in our face and demand our attention.

The ability to focus on what's truly important takes practice. We must build opportunities into our daily lives to think about God and what living life His way looks like for each of us. It's like the exercises and practices a sports team engages in regularly. All that sweat and attention to proper form isn't spent in hopes of perfecting the drills themselves. The effort is expended in the hope that when it really counts, in the big game, when the opponents are right in our faces, that we will be able to do what we've practiced when it really matters. And as Michael Jordan says, you can't dog it in practice and then expect to pull it off in the big game.

It is human nature to underestimate the power of being in a tempting situation. We feel fully committed to eating healthier until an unhealthy treat is waved under our noses. We consider ourselves capable of civilized behavior until we run into someone who drives us crazy. We expect to have little trouble putting time into our most important relationships until the demands of life get in the way. No one expects to let the sacred be choked out by an endless stream of urgent but unimportant tasks.

But if we want the self control that God values we will need to rely on more than human nature and our own judgments. We will need to set aside time to practice (that's where the other traits of the fruit of the Spirit come in). We will want to envision the satisfaction and contentment that come from living in connection rather than living in distraction. What would that look like for you today? What would you need to focus on and think about? What would make up a good practice for you to be more prepared for the big game?

Prayer: Father, today I want to focus my best energy on the things in my life that are truly sacred... my relationships. My relationship with You. My relationships with the people You've entrusted into my life... people who are counting on me to live at my best today. And I want to focus in a realistic and rational way on my relationship with myself... because I know if I don't take good care of me then I will have nothing to give to You or the most sacred relationships in my life. Please show me the difference between genuinely taking care of myself and being self-indulgent to the exclusion of the sacred. In Jesus' Name, amen.

Thursday

And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing. Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise. Philippians 4:8 (NLT)

Happy are those who don't listen to the wicked, who don't go where sinners go, who don't do what evil people do. They love the LORD'S teachings, and they think about those teachings day and night. They are strong, like a tree planted by a river. The tree produces fruit in season, and its leaves don't die. Everything they do will succeed. Psalm 1:1-3 (NCV)

Reflection: If we want to get the most out of our Christian practice, we will need to harness the support of more than just our intellects. To be truly effective we must engage our imaginations. Prisoners of war attest to the unfathomable effectiveness of mental rehearsal. Even when the body is confined and restrained, the imagination can improve our abilities in activities as physical as golf and other sports.

In a sense, our bodies must see it in order to confidently attempt it. That's why Paul tells us that what we focus on really matters. Imagining the good makes it more real to us. Meditating on God's goodness anchors us in a higher reality, giving us a leg up in resisting the less motivating realities that surround us.

What compels us is what we envision.

An inspiring image gives us courage on a visceral level so that we don't need to put nearly as much energy into talking ourselves into doing the right thing. What we know cannot compete with what we feel based on what we've seen. That's why McDonalds and Pepsi are able to sell their products world wide. Our positive associations with these products keeps us reaching for them even when we tell ourselves that we ought to be eating healthier. Seeing is more compelling than any intellectual understanding.

The Psalmist attributes a rich and fruitful life to meditating. The ancient Jews and the early Christians both had rich traditions of mediation. In fact, you'd be hard pressed to find a successful religion that doesn't practice some form of meditation. Meditation is mental rehearsal.

In Eastern traditions the mind is emptied of all its distractions as we notice the stream of our thoughts and allow them to pass by us without engaging with them, as is so common to our nature. This practice allows us to recognize our thought stream in our moment to moment life, rather than get swept away in it. Early Christians practiced a form of this type of meditation called the centering prayer. Instead of focusing on specific thoughts and requests, the Christian quiets his or her mind to see that beneath all of our thoughts and distractions, God is always there. His presence is available to us in any moment. We have only to allow our thoughts to go about their way to appreciate the steady presence beneath all our distractions.

The other approach is about focus rather than emptying the mind. When we think intently about one thing, the mind naturally sets aside any competing stimulus. In falling in love we are often hyper-focused on the things we find attractive about the person we love. This focus doesn't eliminate their flaws, it simply moves them to the background where we are no longer aware of them. Hence the saying, love is blind. Unfortunately, marriage is often the eye opener!

What would you have to envision to be reminded of God's love and presence in your life? Would you want to list the generous things He's done for you? Would you picture His perfect harmony and beauty and artistry?

Prayer: Father, today I just want to focus on the beauty in my life that is there because of You. Teach me how meditate in a way that will draw me closer to You. I want to be strong, I want to be successful. Show me the role meditation plays in strength & success. In Jesus Name, amen.

Friday:

Capture every thought and make it give up and obey Christ.

2 Corinthians 10:5 (NCV)

I tell you the truth, anyone who sneaks over the wall of a sheepfold, rather than going through the gate, must surely be a thief and a robber! But the one who enters through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep recognize his voice and come to him. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.

John 10:1-3 (NLT)

Yes, I am the gate. Those who come in through me will be saved. They will come and go freely and will find good pastures. The thief's purpose is to steal and kill and destroy. My purpose is to give them a rich and satisfying life. "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd sacrifices his life for the sheep. John 10:9-11 (NLT)

Reflection: Jesus offers to be the gatekeeper of what we take into our lives and the good shepherd to guide our thoughts. He knows when an experience that looks good is really only there to destroy us. He doesn't act as the gatekeeper to make the sheep feel penned in. He doesn't come to steal or destroy. He wants to add value to our lives, not take it away. But His judgment about what will bless us and fulfill us is often different from our own. The question is, who's judgment do we want to bet the quality of our lives on?

Healthy and well cared for sheep come to trust the good shepherd. They know His voice because they have learned to associate it with good pasture, safe waters, and quiet rest. The good news is that when we invite Jesus to be the shepherd of our lives, we don't ever have to worry about being alone. He is with us, always. And His motives are pure. He doesn't want to take things from us. He wants to protect us and nourish our lives. He does this because He loves us.

Robbers come to steal and wolves to destroy, but Jesus comes to us to teach us about true rest and a rich life. He isn't trying to exploit the sheep. He has already laid down His life for them. His relationship to them is one of servant leadership, not the pushing and prodding that is better associated with the butcher.

But Jesus will only shepherd us if we invite Him to. He will not force His love or His blessings on us. We must chose whether or not to follow when we ear His voice. This means that we have to accept the humility of needing guidance. We must see ourselves for as limited as we really are. Part of our nature will always be as vulnerable and earth bound as sheep. Baaaaaaa...

But Jesus will also take us on as His apprentice shepherds. He will teach us how to demonstrate servant leadership to our own bodies and minds. We have access to the wisdom of heaven in our daily lives, but only if we are willing to give up the idea of being God in our own lives. We truly become followers of Jesus when we admit that our own judgments and instincts cannot give us the life of blessings we so desire, and we hand the authority for our lives over to Jesus. If we give up our ambition to be self controlled by human standards, the captains of our own destinies, our hands become open to receive a life of eternal blessings. When we stop trying to run the show, it finally becomes a show worth seeing – one baby step (or sheep step) at a time.

Prayer: Father, forgive me for the arrogance that I believe I know better than You what is good for me. Today I want to follow You. Lead me to the right path and I will follow. In Jesus' Name, amen.