

SELF-CONTROL

Last Sunday we alluded to the possibility – ever so lightly, I thought – that the reality of the Christian Life is not found on the surface of life, but on the inside. We become aware of a spiritual realm that is bigger, truer, more real than the physical realm. For want of better words, we live with an inner awareness of a Kingdom that is going on alongside the exterior life. They intersect at moments, at places, or with some people, but the spiritual realm is far greater. It is also eternal. All true meaning and joy come from it. Contrary to some misimpressions of those who talk about it but have never experienced it, this interior life is not individualistic, nor is it experienced in isolation. The bonds of fellowship with others who walk this WAY are powerful indeed and include many people present in covenant friendship all around us, but it also includes many others distant from us, and even some from previous times.

One of the reasons our present culture has so much difficulty comprehending a true and authentic Christianity is that it puts almost all the emphasis on the outer, physical world. Even the church today seems endlessly fascinated and focused on what it can see in the immediate moment. Therefore its life is confined more and more to truth that seems to “pay off” in the physical realm, and immediately. Never mind true character, or the development of the soul. Never mind that the payoff is paltry and doesn't last more than a year or two. As a result, the church is hypnotized, not by its Lord, but by what works in the outer world in terms of attendance, money, fame, and reputation in the world around it. It is not possible to follow Christ *and* be fascinated by the approval, expectations, values, and goals of an external world. There is no patience that way. There is no humility, no loyalty to Jesus, no delight in the presence of a numinous, eternal God ... not that way.

We have tried to look again at the gifts of the Spirit this Lent. But the approach has been different, and probably circuitous for many. I have hoped to make it clearer than ever before that the gifts do not come from this world – and cannot be received without letting go of this world. They cannot be grasped as tools to be used for success or fame in this world. They come from a different realm, and they can only be

used for a life that is tuned to this different realm. *“If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.”*

Some people will always try to grab for the gifts in what I call “normal mode.” This is not entirely their fault. Little has been done in mainline churches to prepare or train people for the interior life of a different WAY – unless, of course, they are among the few who go to prayer retreats, get into Bible study groups, find a mentor, and make daily prayer and Bible study top priorities in their lives.

From time to time, someone among you will suggest that I am just a lone voice. You explain that you have been in and around the church for a lot of years and have never heard so much emphasis put on prayer, obedience to the Holy Spirit, the interior life, and walking a different WAY – not until you ran into me or Chip or this church. So in the midst of a vast world of real and practical forces swirling all around you, you wonder if this is just an aberration – something that we are making up around here.

I am not at all insulted. But it’s far too high a compliment. I am not a lone voice. Nothing I tell you has originated from me. I try to pass it on to you, always painfully aware that my words are too lame and that my feet are still made of clay. But as you may have noticed, I am not apologetic (and alas, not very humble) about the Message itself – about what I have been given to pass on to you. Now, you may be spending so much time on sports, problems, making money, or running from your inner soul that you don’t really hear me very well. But I am not a lone voice. We could start with Abraham, or with Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Elijah, Jeremiah. But let’s start with Jesus. Have you any doubt about His connections with the interior life? Does He seem to you to be living for fame, wealth, or success in the outer world? He even chides His followers, saying, *“If you do things for outward show, you will lose your heavenly reward. If you do things for internal truth, and eternal realms, your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”* (Matthew 6:4-18) That is only the briefest hint, but His whole life comes from such a stance.

It’s true that in our time – in our so-called “post-Christian world” – more and more people are saying that Jesus is irrelevant, and the outer world is making more and more moves to deny His identity and influence. But why so much urgency and passion to deny and cover up the influence of a man of no importance? Jesus has always caused division and controversy. Do we expect it to suddenly be different in our time?

If the present culture should actually succeed in getting Jesus entirely out of the schools, out of all the textbooks, off all the coins, out of all the shrines and traditions of our nation – do you really think Jesus would just blow away? Some people fight to keep Him in the public schools or at our national shrines; I'd be happy if we would keep Him in our *churches*, where we might continually pay attention to His Word and His Way.

The internal Way – the WAY of a spiritual Kingdom that Jesus opened up for us – is far too real and too powerful for the popular opinions of a secular world. It may well be true that our nation is heading into decline because it is abandoning Him. Certainly it's true that He gave our nation birth, regardless of what the rewritten history books may be trying to say about it. But *Jesus* is not in decline in our world. There are vast pockets of loyalty and allegiance to Him in our country, whether we are part of them or not. And even *those* are mild and tentative in comparison to the wildfire of conversion and devotion spreading in third-world countries.

But even if this weren't true, if *we* know Him and have discovered the vastness of His true Kingdom, can anything going on in this world offer reason or purpose enough to turn us away from Him?

I am not a lone voice. The voices some of you listen to are very recent, very paltry, and quite alone in comparison to my own. I'm not talking about my voice sounding like I wish it could, or representing Him like I wish it would. But however poorly or grandly I may speak, that's not the point. Some of you think I am out of step with what's happening today – out of step with most other pastors, and with the leaders of our denomination; out of step, perhaps, with most liberal mainline Christendom in our time. Why am I not more embarrassed by that? Why do I not hang my head, apologize, and keep quiet when people accuse me of that?

Well, people who forget the interior life – who minimize or abandon relationship with Jesus and loyalty to Jesus – in favor of what they are accomplishing in the world, in favor of their own logic or intellect – in favor of their own efforts to run life their own way – eventually cut themselves off from the vine, from the source, from the power of the Christian Life. They forget about obedience to the Holy Spirit of Jesus, and they slowly lose the gifts He once bestowed upon them. When that happens, the church is no longer about Jesus, prayer, the Bible, or living

the LIFE of the Kingdom ourselves. It is about homosexuality, abortion, saving the trees, solving poverty, curing injustice, supporting women's liberation, stopping racial prejudice, being politically correct. I know that such a statement will get me misquoted and misunderstood. But I'm not talking about withdrawing from all the problems or issues of this world; I'm talking about putting the cart before the horse! In deep humility, and in obedience to the Holy Spirit, we are sent into the world. But that's not how we've been going at it of late. Satan has been having a field day. The attitude and atmosphere of the spiritual gifts are not what we sense or feel in the struggles of the church in our time. Christendom in our world today is into endless, Christless fights – at each other's throats – giving lots of time, energy, and money to prove how much we care and how heroically we wage our wars to improve the world ... all while making very little headway, to put it mildly. We are trying to fix things according to our own best schemes and notions, and we hope it will make God very proud of us. But we are not trying to draw people to Christ – who alone can fix or save any of us.

Some of us like getting old. For one thing, we can see the end in sight. Instead of endless years stretching ahead of us in this stupid, dumb-assed mayhem of humans refusing to worship or obey God, we can see the end in sight. Soon we get to join the faithful in a higher, better realm. Though we will miss those left behind, they too will be joining us soon. On the other hand, we don't rush it. That's not faithful either. There is more for us to do and learn here.

Some of us like getting old. It's not as easy to sidetrack us as it once was. It's not as easy to bribe us with false values, or persuade us to trade what builds the soul for that which only builds the body, the pocketbook, or the good will of others who have no idea what they are talking about. When I was a young pastor, I was a voracious reader. I was so eager to learn. Looking back, it was almost an unholy need and urgency. I am still eager to learn; some of you are eager for me to learn as well, and you keep bringing me books. But doing my tax returns recently, I discovered that I don't spend as much on books anymore. Most books don't teach me as much as they used to. Oh, they tell me facts I do not know and endless information I do not know, and it is all interesting. But interesting is not the same as a deep-soul hunger. It is a rare book now that tells me principles I do not know or truth I have not encountered. Reminders are still good, of course.

Among other things, I have read nearly everything written by the saints of prayer down through the ages. I have also read a good many of the modern saints of prayer: Albert Day, Thomas Kelley, Ralph Morton, Agnes and Edgar and John Sanford, John Knox, Elton Trueblood, Joel Goldsmith, Olive Wyon, Sam Shoemaker – the list is long. I have also dabbled more than a little in the spiritual writings of other religions. I'm not trying to be a name-dropper, but some of you look at me funny when I talk about the interior life and the disciplines, and you say, "Where do you get all this?" And you say it like you've never heard of it before, like you wonder if I'm making it up from scratch. And notice, I am not even mentioning the great names down through the ages. No, I am not a lone voice. What seems weird to me is that we live in an age when a lot of folk *are* making things up. A lot of what passes today as sound, age-old Christianity is really quite recent and off-the-cuff, as if a little human logic and a King James Bible were all you needed.

But to get back to the point: It is the interior spiritual life – the relationship with the Living Christ – that has always driven and inspired the best of Christianity in our world. That is what has inspired us, comforted us, given us the gifts that bring us to life – given us our true identity, and our true purpose. And that is what has headed us toward the LIFE beyond this temporal world. In the process, it has sometimes inspired people to make considerable differences in this present world. But that is never the main point or purpose. The people who have made the best and biggest differences in our world have always made them for a realm beyond this world.

So when I read about the lives of the saints, I am never merely interested in the dimensions and plots of this outer world. I always look for the marks of the spiritual world, and the signs of awareness of what's really going on. A few years ago, a man named Richard Marius wrote a biography of Martin Luther. It was a big hit in liberal academic circles. The author is a spiritual idiot. He has almost no comprehension of who Luther was or what Luther was about because he writes without any awareness of the spiritual issues or motives. A man named Heiko Oberman also wrote a biography of Martin Luther. It was profound and powerful. Two authors wrote about the same man, with the same information available. One missed it entirely; one got it deeply, and inspired himself and many others in the process.

Two very brief illustrations:

Teresa of Avila was a nun in the generation just after Luther. Like most of us, she had some hard and harsh situations to deal with when she was young. In some ways they got even tougher when she was older. But somewhere along the way she stumbled into the interior life of prayer – the personal relationship with Jesus. She began to spend more time and more hours in prayer than was usual, even within her Catholic order. This was dangerous. If the Inquisition of her time discovered that she was breaking outside the prescribed, rote prayers of her order – that is, discovered that she was having fun praying, was actually getting in touch with the Holy Spirit, was having ecstatic experiences (which all genuine communication with the Holy Spirit is bound to include) – then she was dead! They would have burned her as a dangerous heretic. But she was cagey enough to elude detection and end up directing her own groups of young women, both protecting them from abuse and teaching them the depths and delights of genuine prayer. She did, by the way, have the help and support of a few more-than-ordinary priests, who knew the institutional church of their time was far off the mark.

Jonathan Edwards was perhaps the most brilliant teacher/theologian to ever come out of America. That, at least, is his reputation. After fifteen years of faithful teaching/preaching/counseling in Northampton, Massachusetts – one of the more prominent churches of his time – he was summarily dismissed from his church. The leader of the coalition that got him fired would later repent and confess how false the charges had been and how unfair the process – and compare himself in deep remorse to Judas Iscariot – but by that time Jonathan Edwards was dead. Having gone from Northampton to be a missionary to the Indians, Edwards had eventually been called to become the President of Princeton University, but by then his health had broken and he died soon after arriving at his new post. Edwards was a man of incredible discipline, who prayed and wrote commentary on the Bible nearly every morning of his life. Though incredibly careful and logical in his thinking, he became the most famous preacher and evangelist of his time (with George Whitefield arguably a close second). His legacy was enormous, both to the church that finally listened to him and to many young preachers who were inspired by him – perhaps most notably Charles Finney (Oberlin College). But this strange, introverted bookworm and writer – who loved his people, but often with little overt warmth –

moved the hearts of people when he preached, though they often couldn't tell exactly why, or what it was that sustained him through all the years of labor, disgrace, heartache, danger. Indeed, he and his family were often in mortal danger from the various wars, uprisings, and Indian raids going on all around them. His letters of comfort to relatives, children, and friends who were in grief or grave danger sound strange indeed to our ears. *It was the interior life!* He was often caught up in ecstasy in his prayer life. So were his wife and his daughter. So were many of the Puritans, who today we love to picture as stodgy and grim and mirthless. As is so frequently true of the saints, what went on in the exterior of their lives was only the tip of the iceberg. What motivated, inspired, comforted, and energized them was life on the inside – life with the Risen Christ.

So once again, shall we talk about the gifts of the Spirit?

Last week we talked about the Message that was converting the Roman Empire in the first two centuries after Jesus – the Message being that Jesus was sent from God: He is not dead; He is ALIVE! Our world killed Him, but death could not hold Him. If you want to know the truth of this for yourself, you must go into a lonely, quiet place where there are no distractions and no hurry. Then send your own soul's earnest probe into the quiet. Then say to the void: "I don't know if what Your crazy followers are telling me is true, but if You *are* alive – if You are really here and true – I invite You to come to me also. Take my life – guide it and direct it however You will." And then wait ... and see what happens.

Jesus comes in different ways to different people. Sometimes it is startling and immediate, like with Paul on the Damascus Road. Other times, a person goes days, even weeks, before they realize that Jesus has responded to their invitation. Sometimes, once we have invited Jesus to be in charge, we are confronted with obvious new directions and decisions. Other times, we don't notice until we look at the wake and realize that our lives have changed direction, but it was so subtle that at first we weren't certain of it. Soon, however, there is no mistaking it. However it happens: If we are truly willing and truly mean the invitation, He will come! Our lives and our priorities will change. Our lives will take on more and more of the flavor and power of His gifts. Only, it will be a power not our own.

Did I forget to mention that we do not get to choose the gifts? That is, we do not get to choose which gift we get next. That's probably obvious to all of you, because the whole thing is in the context of our turning our lives over to Jesus. Nevertheless, one of the most fascinating things for all of us this Lent is the anticipation and excitement of seeing which gift Jesus is going to give us next. If we are not playing games – if we really do meditate and pray for His presence with us, and if we really do open ourselves to receive more of His gifts – there is no way Jesus is going to miss an opportunity like that. We know Him pretty well, and Jesus is neither stupid nor stingy. So if we are ready to take another step – ready to open ourselves to another dimension of the spiritual life – it is not a matter of “if.” It is a matter of when, in what manner, and which gift. Only, He chooses the gift for us. And we suddenly remember: that's how it works with true gifts.

For most of us (not all of us, perhaps, but most of us), if we do not have this gift already, it is doubtless a gift we have not yet been willing to receive. In other words, the gift is not going to come into our lives without a certain amount of disruption. That surprises some people. Why would we not want all of the gifts of the Spirit? Why would we not want to receive them willingly and eagerly? How long do you have to stop and think about *that* one?

Why would I not want the gift of PATIENCE? At the pace we try to live and with all the things we are trying to accomplish ... are you kidding? Do you think I really want Jesus to give me a sane schedule? How could I ever catch up to the life going on around me?!

Do you think I really want the gift of JOY? With all the excuses I find useful and all the people, places, and things I try to blame ... are you kidding? If people suspect I have joy, they might think my life is pretty good. Then what will happen to their compassion? They will stop trying to help me. They will even get jealous and try to take me down. No, no – I have to keep telling them how hard my life is.

There are no gifts of the Spirit that we take easily into our lives. They all crowd out patterns and habits that we have found most useful, and that we think help us to survive.

Last week we talked about PEACE. Today I want to comment about SELF-CONTROL. There is a whole string of incredible gifts in the list given in Galatians 5, and even that list doesn't name them all. Clearly

I am demonstrating the gift of self-control by limiting myself to comments on only two of the gifts. But it is my expectation and conviction that you will be benefited most by contemplating these gifts in your own Lenten meditations. I have only tried to set up some guidelines and approaches that I hope will be helpful to the real thing. And the real thing is always between you and the Holy Spirit.

Why did I choose “self-control” as one of the gifts to comment about? Surely it is one of the least inspired-sounding of the gifts. That, of course, is partly why I chose it. On top of that, it seems contradictory to the entire flavor and meaning of the passage itself. That is also why I chose it. It also closes the list – it is the last to be named of the gifts of the Spirit. Normally we would expect the last named gift to be one of great prominence, almost a carrier and summation of all the gifts. Who chooses the weakest runner to run last in the relay? Certainly not the Apostle Paul.

For all these reasons, I want to comment briefly on the gift of self-control. Self-control in this context does not mean what *we* usually mean when we say “self-control.” If self-control means we control ourselves, how is that a gift of the Spirit? The Spirit makes it possible for us to control ourselves? Well, that’s precisely what most people conclude – if they think about the gifts of the Spirit at all. They think that the Spirit makes it possible for us to get more effective at controlling our own lives. Back to bootstrap religion. Back to us being in charge, only with more rigorousness than ever. Back to “God helps those who help themselves.” Which, of course, would be necessary if the Holy Spirit didn’t really exist or really help us, or if religion were just ethereal encouragement for us to do the right thing – what we know we should be doing all along – but in the end we have to do for ourselves. How often does that end up being the American version of Christianity?

By this time, I should doubtless trust all of you to see through such satanic twists and turns and traps. But I do not. However much regard and pride I may have in you, I have watched too many astute and faithful people get careless with this one. If you get careless with this last gift, it will deliver you back to a self-help operation, and, as Paul says, “*Christ will do you no good whatsoever.*”

First of all, if you help yourself, God cannot help you. God does not help those who help themselves. God is unable to help those who help themselves. As long as you are helping yourself, you are still in charge of your own life. You have not turned will and life over to the

guidance and direction of Jesus' Holy Spirit. Some things that are critical, huge, and essential to the Christian Life are still missing – some things called surrender, obedience, willingness, trusting in God. Why is the Christian Life so rare and so scary to all of us? Precisely because it requires that we give up all our self-help schemes. Precisely because we have to put it all in the hands of God. Precisely because we have to admit our powerlessness – go humble and teachable and willing to die to the old life, meaning all our ways of trying to succeed by our own efforts and hang on to our own plans and techniques.

God does not help those who help themselves. God is unable to help those who help themselves. They will not let God in to manage and control their lives – not really, and not where it matters most. They ask for God's help, to be sure. They do things for God, things they think God would approve of and even be grateful to have done. But doing things for God is not the same as doing what God asks us to do. It is the difference between Humanism and True Christianity. It is the difference between God as our mascot, and us as God's servants.

Self-control is not a gift. Spirit-control is a gift. Spirit-control is a gift worthy to conclude and finish off this list. But there is no "appropriate" word. So, as happens all the time when we try to communicate spiritual truth in human language, Paul chooses a word or phrase that's as close as he can get, and then uses the context and meaning of the rest of the passage to alert us to its true meaning. We have to translate into spiritual dimensions. That's true, I remind you, of all our most important words: repent, redeem, salvation, *Christos*, forgiveness, conversion, gospel, sacrifice, cross. All of these words have taken on meanings way beyond their original earthly definitions. We have no spiritual language; we can only use our earthbound language to point toward higher truth, and hope that others who want to will track the true meaning. No time to go through all of them, but just for a reminder: What does "Christ" (*Christos*) really mean? It means somebody poured oil on your head. It means you were anointed with oil. I doubt if that is the landlocked definition most of you think of when we name Jesus "The Christ." The Christ of God: the one whom God anointed with the Holy Spirit. Well, at least we can track some of the dimensional development, but it is still a long way from somebody pouring oil on your head, even if that's part of a ceremony to name you priest or king. I don't know about you, but when I call Jesus "The Christ," it goes off all the charts of human definition.

SELF-CONTROL

Finally, look at the context. Here is this list of the gifts of the Spirit – gifts Jesus will bring to us if we spend enough time in His presence and open ourselves to His mercy and love. The last gift mentioned does indeed summarize and fulfill the intent of the passage. Last of all, and best of all, the Spirit controls our lives. What a relief! It no longer depends on our power, our intelligence, our determination, or our courage or patience or wisdom. All these things are now provided by the Spirit – if we go open and willing to let the Spirit have His way in our lives. And in case we did miss it, Paul adds, *“Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires.”* Does that sound like self-control to you? And in case we missed even that, the next sentence is: *“If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.”* I rest my case. But don’t pay any attention to that. Just go tell Jesus you want His gifts ... and that you are willing to give up anything and everything He asks, in order to receive them.