

“Self-control, an Attribute of God”

Date: March 26, 2011

Place: Lakewood

UMC

Texts: Matthew 26:47-56; Galatians 5:22-26

Theme: Self-control; self-restraint

Occasion: UMM Lenten
Breakfast

When I think of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, I am amazed at his self-control. He knew what was coming. He knew that he was about to be arrested, and the horrible pain that he was about to endure. Here was God in human flesh, with all the power of Heaven at His disposal. How tempting it must have been for him to use His power to defend Himself.

In all four of the Gospels this event is recorded for history. Matthew, Mark and Luke report that one of the disciples draws his sword and cuts off the ear of one of the arresting officials. Only John tells us that it was Peter who drew his sword and cut off the high priest's servant's ear. That servant's name was Malchus, we are told.

It's not surprising that Peter was the one who drew his sword and acted so swiftly to defend Jesus. He was one of the sons of thunder. He was known for his temper and his impulsive nature. He was under attack and he defended himself, and our Lord.

But how did Jesus respond? What was the response of the Son of the God? Jesus commanded Peter to put his sword away. And then he healed the servant. Put his ear back on, and healed it, we are told. And in the book of Matthew Jesus says these words: “Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?” Jesus had the power to defend himself, and chose not to.

Jesus exercised self-control. I believe that in Jesus, we see God more fully. Here in the Garden of Gethsemene, we see an attribute of God that we don't talk

about very much. God's self-control. How God chooses to limit God's use of power. Though he has the power and ability to do certain things, God chooses to exercise self-restraint.

In Psalm 103:8 we read: "The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love." You see, God's righteousness is always opposed to sin. But God exercises self-restraint in punishing His people. God is slow to anger, giving his people more time to repent. God exercises self-restraint in how He deals with His people and His Creation.

When God created the world, God created it with certain mathematical principles. The laws of physics, the laws of nature, the laws of chemistry - are all ways that we see God revealing Himself, and restraining Himself. When the laws of nature are such that warm air and cool water and the winds are such - the conditions are right for hurricanes to form. God does not change the principles of the universe because a city of people is living in the path of the hurricane.

God has chosen not to intervene in all of the events of human history. It is not that God is uncaring or unsympathetic. God is simply a God of self-control, and does not interrupt the natural laws. If you or I step off the floor of a high rise building, the law of gravity will pull us to the ground. God has given us free will and does not intervene - even if the consequences are painful, or horrific.

Think of the holocaust in Nazi Germany, or more recently in Rwanda. How it must grieve our Heavenly Father to see his children destroying each other. But, exercising self-control, does not intervene. Some say such a God is cruel. But a God who would do otherwise would not be a God who chooses to give his creatures free-will. We would be puppets, with God pulling the strings.

God exercises self control and so allows us to make choices. We are not puppets. We are a people who love our freedom. This freedom that we cherish is a

gift from a loving God, who chooses not to intervene, but allows us to make choices, for good or for evil. Of course, the Father wishes that we would always choose the good. And we also know that we will be held accountable for the choices we make. The Day of Judgement.

But even still, the Lord taries in returning, Jesus waits to return in final victory, allowing the human race more time to repent and to freely choose to surrender to the love and grace of God, offered to us through His Son, Jesus Christ.

I would submit to you this morning, that we serve a God who is not only all-powerful, but a God who also exercises self-restraint and self-control. God is gracious and slow to anger.

Now, If we serve such a God, who revealed Himself most completely in Jesus of Nazareth, who chose not to defend Himself in the Garden but showed self-restraint, I submit to you men, today, that we are called to show self-restraint and self-control in our own lives, and to be like God.

We need to practice, and we need to teach our boys and young men sexual restraint. It is still God's ideal for us to refrain from sexual intercourse until marriage. It's not a common practice any more. But we should not be afraid to teach our boys and our young men that sex outside of marriage is outside of God's will for our lives.

And we need to teach them how to deal with sexual temptation - to deal with the easy access to pornography that's available online. Self-control is a virtue. But it needs to be taught. It is a silent secret among the men of God in churches today, that we are struggling with the pornography that's on our computers. We need to talk about it, and encourage each other to be men of integrity, and not to lead double-lives.

Self-control is an attribute of God, and it is a virtue of Christian men.

But why stop there? I think that many of us need to learn self-control when it comes to our tempers. Too many of us fellows are quick to fly off the handle and to say what's on our minds. We get angry with our wives, too quickly. We get angry when we're driving. Anyone else have road-rage issues? We need to get our anger under control, because its an offense to our Christian witness. Any amens in the house today?

Athletes practice self-control. I'm sure that many of them would rather be out there with their friends partying instead of going to practice. But they discipline their bodies so that when its time to perform, they're ready. It takes self-control to do what doesn't come naturally.

During Lent, some of you have given up something as a lenten fast. Perhaps it is chocolate, or beer, or cigarettes, or swearing. It takes self-control, does it not? Jesus asks us to practice self-denial, which I think is simply another word for self-control.

The British cynic Cyril Connolly spoke the truth when he said, "We are all serving a life-sentence in the dungeon of self." Self-denial is an appeal from Jesus to break out of that dungeon. Men of God, what is holding you back from a deeper relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ?

Is it food? Is Jesus asking you to gain some mastery over your physical appetites? Is Jesus asking you to give up your little habit of gambling? Not a big deal you say? Would you be willing to give the money you're using on lottery tickets to missions instead? How hard would it be for you to give up that little indulgence?

For some of us, self-control is a huge issue. There are habits that we started when we were younger, that are still haunting us, even at this age of our lives. With the help of God and the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, we can experience victory over those addictions. He can set us free from ourselves, so that we might be free to

serve Him. We gain this self-control, that we so desire, by surrendering our lives to his love and care. Come, Lord, Jesus, set us free, we pray. Amen.