

Self-control

Mark 8:27-38

September 16, 2012

(Unwrap a Snickers bar.)

This is self-control!

I would love to take a bite of this sweet, rich, peanutty, chocolatty Snickers bar, but I won't, because I am exercising self-control. As much as I want to take a big bite of this yummy Snickers bar, I will deny myself. I will resist the desire. I will not give in to it. I will deny myself the pleasure of indulging.

This is self-control!

Self-control is about controlling my desires, instead of allowing my desires to control me. Self-control is about being strong-willed, well-disciplined, about mastering my own passions. The opposite is being impulsive, weak-willed, undisciplined, dissolute.

Self-control comes into play, of course, not just in the desire for food, but in all our human desires. Self-control is about mastering our desire for food or for drink or for sex. Self-control is about mastering our desire for money or for things. Self-control is about mastering our desire for attention or for revenge. It's even about mastering our desire to sit around and do nothing!

To be self-controlled means to not to indulge every whim: not to eat whatever I feel like eating, not to drink whatever I feel like drinking, not to say whatever I feel like saying, not to buy whatever I feel like buying, and not to sit around doing nothing worthwhile when there are things to be done just because I feel like sitting around and doing nothing.

To be self-controlled means taking charge, exercising control over my appetite and my libido and my tongue. It means being disciplined about what I do with my mind and my body and my time.

So, how are you doing?

You know, there are times when it is really tough to be a minister! There is so much I love about my job. I am so privileged to be able to talk with you about subjects of such profound importance and to share with you deep feelings and thoughts. But it is hard to be a minister sometimes. It's hard when I have to say something I know you won't like to hear, but it's especially hard -- like right now! -- when I have to say something I won't like to hear.

How can I talk with you about something I struggle with? All week long I've been thinking about this sermon about self-control and looking at myself and thinking ... oh, yeah? Now, to tell you the truth, I am wonderfully disciplined, I am marvelously self-controlled -- in spurts, at times -- but good self-control -- in spurts, at times -- really isn't self-control, is it?

But I will talk about it anyway, because it's my job. It's my job to proclaim to you -- to us -- the good news that is good news because it's God's news. It's my job to shine the light of God's word and way on all of us alike, to expose our warts and our flaws and our failures, not to shame us, but to heal us, not to make us feel bad, but to lead us into the life God intends for us. And so it's my job to talk about self-control, not because I have mastered it, but because it is one of the good gifts God intends for us.

It is there among the fruits, the list of virtues, that Paul says the Spirit produces in us: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility, and self-control. It comes last in the list, which certainly doesn't mean it is any less important than the others, but certainly does mean that for Paul it is simply one virtue among the all the others.

But for others in Paul's day, it was not just one virtue among all the others. Self-control was celebrated as the queen of the virtues, by classical philosophers, by Socrates and Aristotle and the Stoics, by Jewish philosophers like Philo, by Jesus' contemporaries, the Essenes, the authors of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

For them, it was the most important of virtues because it is so necessary to every moral decision, so necessary for dealing with every impulse, for managing every desire, across the whole range of human experience and behavior. For them, the self-controlled person was the pinnacle of moral achievement: disciplined, resolute, temperate, balanced, sound in mind and will. This was the moral ideal: the man (because they only concerned themselves with men) the man in control of his emotions and impulses, the man in control of his words and his actions, the man in control of himself, the man in control.

It's surprising then, as one biblical scholar has noted, that self-control plays such a small part in the Bible. It is there in Paul's list of virtues, but at the end, the last of nine in the list. And the word Paul uses, *ἐγκράτεια*, the word translated here as "self-control," is used only three other times in the entire New Testament and two of those three occurrences are in a single verse!

Self-control is an important Christian virtue; restraining and controlling the desires that can steer us away from the Kingdom of God is a mark of the Spirit; but self-control is not singled out as being especially important. Self-control is not the queen of Christian virtues. Why not?

Maybe because Christian virtue is not about gaining control over myself, but about giving control to God's Spirit in me. Maybe because Christian virtue is not merely about subduing my desires, but about replacing them with a higher and better desire!

Christian virtue is about being filled with a higher and better desire. It's not about getting rid of passion, but about finding a better passion. It's about a new immediacy. It's about immersing myself in a new desire, a new hunger, a new thirst, a hunger and thirst for God!

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and mind and soul and strength! And when you do, when you love God above everything else, what do you do? You want to do what pleases him. You want to obey him. You want to serve him.

That's what Jesus did. He loved God above everything else and he did what pleased God. He walked the path of obedience. He was the Lord's servant. So if we love God above everything else, we will do what Jesus did. We will follow Jesus. And if you want to follow Jesus ... you must deny yourself, carry your cross, and follow him.

Deny yourself. That sounds like self-control, denying your desires, restraining your impulses. Except Jesus does not ask you to deny your desires. He doesn't ask you to deny yourself this or that. He asks you to deny ... yourself!

What does that mean? The word that is used is the same as word used of Peter's denial of Jesus. Peter denied Jesus. He disavowed any relationship with him. He said he didn't know him. He abandoned Jesus. He left Jesus on his own. Surely he cared about Jesus, but to save his own life, he abandoned Jesus. He did not defend him or stand with him, but left him to God's mercy.

That's what Peter did, but when you think about it, isn't it fair to say that two people denied Jesus that day? Peter was one and the other was ... Jesus himself!

Jesus denied himself. He did not defend himself. He did not assert his rights or claim his prerogative as the Son of God. He abandoned himself and let himself to the mercy of God!

Jesus exercised self-control, yes. He restrained his speech and his actions. He did not protest the injustice of all that was being said about him and all that was being done to done to him. But what Jesus did was about much more than self-control. It was about sacrifice.

Jesus made a choice, just like Peter did. Peter chose to deny Jesus to save himself. Jesus chose to deny himself ... to save Peter! And us.

What will you choose?

If you choose to follow Jesus, it means denying yourself, abandoning yourself, setting aside your rights and prerogatives, even allowing yourself be crucified ... in order to save someone, in order to save your neighbor, in order to save yourself. Jesus did not deny himself because it seemed like a good thing to do, because it made him in that moment a better and stronger person. Jesus denied himself out of love for God, out of sharing God's love for God's people, for a higher purpose, for the sake of a better desire.

And that's ultimately what self-control is about. It is not merely a negative act, restraining unruly desires, but it is a positive act, giving yourself away, making an offering of your life in love. It's not just about denying yourself good things (take a bite of one half of Snickers bar), but about giving good things away! (Offer other half of Snickers bar to a person in the congregation.)