

2018 09 02 – Self-Control

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23
James 1:17-27

So how many of you have moments in your life that you would like to take back? Moments when you have let your desires, your impulses, your emotions take over and have done something, or said something that you now regret? If we are honest, I'm sure that all of us have numerous moments in our lives that we would like to do over.

Let's think about a few examples:

- going home at the end of a rough day and eating an entire container of Haagen-Daaz ice cream, a party-sized bag of chips, or a large package of cookies, or
- dealing it with a particularly annoying person and responding in anger, possibly even with the type of language that we usually avoid, or
- having a few too many drinks and sharing stories or confidences that should have been left unsaid, or
- getting so angry that we lash out not just with words but also with our hands or even with a more dangerous weapon.

There are so many ways that we can lose control, so many ways that we can hurt ourselves and others if we are unable to control our destructive impulses.

In the gospel of Mark we read:

Jesus summoned the crowd again and said to them, “Listen to me, all of you, and try to understand. Nothing that enters us from the outside makes us impure; it is what comes out of us that makes us impure. If you have ears to hear, then listen.”

Jesus was saying that the Ground of our Being doesn't really care about what we eat or whether we follow the ritual of washing our hands before we eat. What the Sacred cares about is how we treat ourselves and how we treat others.

[Jesus] went on, “It is what comes out of us that makes us unclean. For it is from within – from our hearts – that evil intentions emerge: promiscuity, theft, murder, adultery, greed, malice, deceit, obscenity, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evils come from within and make us impure.”

It's quite a list, isn't it? How do we avoid letting all these sinful actions into our lives? How do we control our destructive impulses and desires that can get us into trouble? Well first, let's try to understand this whole concept of self-control. This week I did a little research on the Internet and I found a couple of reliable sources.

First of all I found an article in the *Psychology Today* magazine by a Dr. Eliot Berkman. In that article, Dr. Berkman argued that self-control is not a virtue or quality that remains stable throughout a person's life or even throughout a person's day. The amount of self-control that we have is impacted by other factors such as: fatigue, hunger, mood, how much alcohol we have

consumed and how much self-control we have already exercised in that day or even in that hour. As an example he suggests that we consider a family dinner. Those family members who spent most of the evening “biting their tongues” to avoid starting up some old family argument would be more likely to overeat during the meal than those who happily aired their grievances. The more you have to exercise control the harder it gets, they even have a word for this , it’s called “ego-depletion.” <https://www.psychologytoday.com/ca/blog/the-motivated-brain/201504/do-we-overeat-because-poor-self-control>

So knowing that this resource is impacted by outside forces, what can we do to improve our self-control? What can we do to improve the way that we interact with our family, our peers and our neighbours. Well, obviously we can do our best to avoid fatigue by getting a good sleep, we can avoid hunger by making sure that we eat proper and regular meals and, of course, we can avoid excessive consumption of alcohol. But what can we do about our mood? This is where Dr. Beckman makes an interesting observation. He writes, “Just as negative mood can diminish self-control, positive mood can enhance it. Just as exerting self-control initially reduces the ability to do so later, restorative activities such as prayer, meditation and self-affirmation amplifies it.” Let me say that again, restorative activities such as prayer, meditation and self-affirmation actually improve our mood and increase our self-control.

This observation comes not from a church resource, but from a secular magazine. People with PhD’s in psychology are acknowledging the fact that taking the time to connect with the sacred within us can have a substantial

impact on our ability to control our actions in the world. I found this same suggestion in an article from Forbes, a renowned business magazine. The article that I read listed six techniques for improving self-control and at the top of the list was meditation. It said

Even simple techniques like mindfulness, which involves taking as little as five minutes a day to focus on nothing more than your breathing and your senses, improves your self-awareness and your brain's ability to resist destructive impulses. Buddhist monks appear calm and in control for a reason. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/travisbradberry/2012/09/17/the-six-secrets-of-self-control/#5023c8d42d4e>

So let's go back to our scripture readings for today. This time to the book of James, where the author of the letter writes:

Remember this, my dear sisters and brother, be quick to listen, but slow to speak and slow to anger; for God's justice is never served by our anger. So do away with all your filth and the last vestiges of wickedness in you. Humbly welcome the word which has been planted in you, because it has power to save you.

"Humbly welcome the word which has been planted in you, because it has the power to save you." That word is, of course, the Holy Mystery, the Ground of our Being, the Essence of Love. It is that sacred part of each one of us that is our truth and our freedom. When we welcome that part of us, when we focus on that part of us through prayer or meditation then we will be saved from our own destructive impulses, our own personal list of sins.

Self-control is a one of the many gifts of the Spirit. We can amplify that gift by recognizing our worth as beloved children of God. We can amplify that gift by taking good care of the bodies that God has given us. We can amplify that gift by taking time in our day to acknowledge and to connect with the Essence of Love that resides in each one of our hearts.