

14 March 2021

Giving Up . . . Control

Matthew 6:25-34

In the Story Journey through Scripture that we started last summer and have been pursuing off and on ever since then, we spent one full day on Abraham, and another on Jacob. Let me review those stories in part today. God promised Abraham that his descendants would be a great multitude, that they would inherit the land of Canaan, and that through Abraham, all nations on earth would be blessed. But, as you may have noticed, all those promises are set in the future, long after Abraham's death, which didn't help Abraham and his wife Sarah. They weren't really concerned about the "blessing to all nations" business, or even the "great multitude bit." They just wanted a child, and they were getting old. Abraham mentioned that to God, who said, "Trust me."

So they waited a few years. Nothing. When God visited Abraham a second time and reaffirmed his promises, Abraham said, "Um, God . . . about that. You know, we still don't have any children, so in terms of having *many* descendants . . ." God said, "Trust me." But a year or so later, they decided it was time to take a hand themselves. Sarah had a maidservant named Hagar, whom she brought to Abraham. "Here's what you should do. Take Hagar as a second wife, have a child with her, and since she's my maid, it'll be almost as if her child is mine." Abraham said, "Yes, dear." He took Hagar as wife, and they had a child: Ishmael. So, the next time God visited Abraham, Abraham was able to say, "Hey, I have a son now! Something for you to work with! I just thought I'd help the process a little." God said, "Congratulations! He's a great kid, but that's not what I meant. Trust me." Years later, when Abraham was a hundred and Sarah was ninety, they had a child, a boy. They named him Isaac, which means, "he laughs." It's not clear who is laughing, but I think it was God.

Isaac had two sons, Esau and Jacob. Esau was the elder; Jacob was the smarter. By the time they were both adults, Jacob had managed to swindle Esau out of everything he owned. This made Esau angry, homicidal in fact, and Jacob decided to go visit relatives out of town. While he was traveling, God visited him in a dream and said, "I will make your descendants a multitude; they will inherit the land; and all nations will be blessed through you." Familiar? Then God added, "And don't worry about going to a strange land; I'll be with you. I'll bless you and bring you home." When Jacob woke up, he said, "God, if you'll do all that, then I promise I'll . . . I'll tithe."

For the next twenty or so years, Jacob lived with his relatives. He acquired two wives, a dozen children, and great wealth (as measured in total sheep). God blessed him, as he had promised. But Jacob still spent every waking minute trying to manage his own life: scheming and conniving and manipulating others. Finally he made himself such a pain that his relatives are sick of him, and he had nowhere to go but back home, where older brother Esau was waiting. Jacob realized that there wasn't a single thing he could do to fix his situation. He was helpless. At that point, Jacob prayed the only sincere prayer we ever hear from him. It went something like this: "God remember you promised to be with me? I need you now. Help." And God did. Esau received him with forgiveness and joy, and God's promise was again fulfilled.

I spent a fair bit of time on Abraham, Sarah, and Jacob because of a trait that they share: the need to control their own circumstances. They had trouble letting things out of their direct supervision. Today I want to talk that need to feel in control.

I have to start with a disclaimer, though. There are people whose need to control is so overpowering that it destroys their ability to respect and care for others. They become abusive and cruel and treat people as either puppets to manipulate or obstacles to crush. This is sometimes called Controlling Personality Disorder, and it's a serious mental illness. I'm not talking about that. No, today I want to talk about the garden variety of that sickness, the itch to run our own circumstances that may affect any of us. What are the signs of a control person?

Control people like to plan their own schedules, often in detail, and hate disruptions of those plans. They get frustrated with late flights, meetings that go overtime, and they hate it when their wife says, "Say, while you're out, would you stop at the store and get something?" Because that messes up your previously set agenda, and doesn't your wife realize that you *already* had your route planned, and making another stop will mean you have to *change* that? Or, you know, something like that. I myself have known people like that. Or, again, control people can be very hard-working – even harder-working than necessary, in fact, because they're afraid to let other people help. Those other people might do it wrong. In school, control people *hated* group projects, where their grade depended on how well Alex and Megan and Jessie did their parts. They hated those assignments. They *loathed* them with a blue passion! I myself have known people who felt that way.

Control people are suspicious of new things, because you can't control the unknown. When traveling through a strange town, they will usually stop for lunch at a chain restaurant where they *know* the food will be mediocre, rather than try a local place that they've never heard of, where the food might be bad, or good. Control people aren't sure what to do with unsolicited generosity. When they're given something, they feel the need to reciprocate, so that it becomes an exchange rather than a gift. Remember Jacob's dream? God promised to take care of him and asked nothing in return, but Jacob immediately tried to turn God's grace into a transaction – if you'll do that, I'll tithe! Transactions are controllable. Generosity isn't.

Control people hate open-ended waiting. They don't mind waiting if they know how long the wait will be, because then it isn't a wait but an appointment, but waiting without having any idea how long makes them feel helpless. And they don't like feeling helpless. When they get stuck waiting without knowing how long, they feel compelled to begin making other plans. Like Abraham and Sarah, working out the auxiliary marriage and contingency baby, not so much because they didn't believe God but because they couldn't leave it entirely up to God.

And control people worry. A lot. All the time. In the middle of the night. While driving. In fact, every time they aren't actively doing something, the chances are they're worrying about something else, because – face it – no matter how hard we try to manage our circumstances, we will never be able to get everything under control. There will always be something in your life that you are helpless to do anything about, and if you're a control person, that will eat at you.

I could go on. I am intimately acquainted with the traits of a control person. As I say, I have known people like that. So here's my question: Could we give it up?

I'm not saying we shouldn't plan or have schedules. Our lives are surrounded by chaos, and we have to impose some order on it, or be swallowed up by it. I'm just suggesting that control should be a tool, not an end in itself. It should not be a need, because that's when it can become more important than, for instance, our relationships. And yes, control kills relationships. The more we need to be in control, the more superficial our relationships will be. Controlled relationships aren't relationships; they're organizational flow charts. Moreover, the stronger our need for control, the more anxious and tense our lives will be, because we *can't* control everything. So – shallow relationships and high blood pressure. There has to be a better way. Hear the words of Jesus:

We read Matthew 6, verses 25-34.

²⁵ 'Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷ And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ²⁸ And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹ yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ³⁰ But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? ³¹ Therefore do not worry, saying, "What will we eat?" or "What will we drink?" or "What will we wear?" ³² For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³ But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴ So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.

Looking over my files, which by the way are carefully organized by scripture reference, it appears that this is the passage of scripture that I have preached on more than any other. Apparently, I know someone who needs to hear this, and keeps needing to be reminded. But it's *hard!* How do you not worry about food and drink and clothing and shelter and car payments and mortgage and health insurance? How do you not worry about tomorrow, when we all know how bad tomorrow can be? And Jesus doesn't help. He doesn't tell us how to do this, exactly. He simply says what God said to Abraham: Trust me.

Do you know what the opposite of faith is? It isn't doubt. Doubt is just one particularly intense part of the life of faith. No, the opposite of faith is fear. The opposite of faith is worry. The opposite of faith is insisting we do things ourselves, because we're tired of waiting for God, or maybe we don't trust God to do things *right*. (Remember, those horrible school group projects?) Faith is when you realize that you don't have everything under control, that you will never have everything under control, that that's okay. Because God can be trusted.