Self-Control: Denying Self, Conforming to God’s Will

A sermon preached by The Reverend Thomas Frizzell, Chapel Pastor of the U.S. Naval Academy, on Parent’s Weekend, 14 August 2016.


What is your preferred style of music? Is it classical? I enjoy classical music. My oldest daughter, Caitlin, is classically trained in vocal performance and currently is making her professional debut as a Vocal Fellow at Tanglewood, in Western Massachusetts, the summer home of the Boston Pops. However, I must confess that Country and Western music is my preferred genre. Although I have a distant relative, Lefty Frizzell, who is a Country and Western giant, I prefer more modern Country Music. One of my favorite artists is Carrie Underwood. Her song Jesus Take the Wheel is a classic. Released in 2005, it still is played frequently on the radio, telling the story of a mother and her infant traveling to her parents’ home, late on Christmas Eve. Distracted by the problems, perhaps poor decisions that she has battled over the past year, she is going too fast and begins to spin on the black ice beneath her tires. In fear, this distraught mother throws up her hands as Carrie Underwood launches into the refrain:

Jesus take the wheel
Take it from my hands
Cause I can't do this on my own
I'm letting go
So give me one more chance
Save me from this road I'm on
Jesus take the wheel

In our Gospel Lesson, the Prodigal Son has made some decisions that have fractured relationships and endangered his future. Decisions have consequences. Good decisions do not always have favorable outcomes; however, poor decisions often have bad consequences. In the case of the Prodigal, he dishonored his father by requesting his inheritance. Surprisingly, his father grants the request, allowing his younger son to liquidate assets and travel abroad. There, the Prodigal lives for the moment, spending excessively, without setting aside a nest-egg to weather unforeseen storms.
The Prodigal is accused of “dissolute living” which could be translated as excess or riotous living (αςωτως in Luke 15:13). Debauchery is unfairly suggested by commentators and preachers, condemning the Prodigal for abuse of alcohol and sexual promiscuity. It is, after all, the Prodigal’s older brother that makes an accusation about devouring the inheritance on prostitutes (Luke 15:30). The Prodigal may have squandered his new found wealth on women and wine; however, the text does not lead us to this conclusively. For sure, the Prodigal lived for the moment, lacking the self-control to curb his spending. Unable to deny himself in the short-term, the unexpected famine was his undoing in the long-term.

We exercise self-control when we live within our means and set aside resources for a rainy day. I must confess. I have not always exercised self-control with my finances. There was a time when Connie, my wife, and I had a large amount of unsecured debt – credit card balances that we would roll-over to low Introductory Rate Offers that regularly flooded our mailbox. We lived well beyond our means. Luckily, we were able to pay-off our entire debt without resorting to drastic measures that could have endangered our future. Thanks be to God!

I’ve heard of college students that have $30K in credit card debt, above and beyond their student loans. Midshipmen, if you have not yet begun to receive credit card offers, you will. Even Navy Federal, our own Credit Union, will entice you to live beyond your means. Resist the temptation! Plebes, in a few short years you will be offered a loan at very favorable rates. The intent of the loan is for the purchase of a car; however, many take the loan for other reasons, such as an engagement ring, or to invest, with the side-benefit of establishing a good credit score, while repaying the loan after commissioning. Don’t squander the proceeds by living in the moment. Let Jesus take the wheel. Pray for the Holy Spirit to assist you in exercising financial responsibly.

Self-Control is essential in all aspects of life, but especially in relationships. What is going on between this father and his sons? The Prodigal disrespects his father by treating him as if he were dead. Inheritance is only given at death, not while the father is still living. Rather than refusing such an unimaginable request, the father grants the Prodigal’s appeal. A rare father indeed! We are told that the father divides his property (life in the Greek, see 15:12 & 15:30) – a lifetime of work, between his sons. This parable gives us insight into God the Father! Our inheritance of eternal life comes at the expense of God’s life, taking on flesh, dying on the cross, rising from the dead. The father gave his life to his sons. But even the older son disrespected his father, unable to see his own prodigal nature.
While sulking in the field, unable to rejoice at his brother’s return, the Father goes out to the elder son, imploring him to join the celebration. The elder son says to his father, “I continually slave for you - all these years!” The verb to slave (15:29) is in contrast to the Prodigal’s desire to return as a hired hand that receives wages (15:17 & 19) for work done. Obviously the relationship between the elder son and his father was strained long before the younger brother returns to the fold! Perhaps the elder son feels entitled, after years of exercising self-control and doing right by his father. I could say a lot about an entitlement mentality to which USNA Midshipmen, Naval Academy graduates and senior naval officers can fall victim. I have experience in succumbing to the temptation. Bottom line - an Entitlement Mentality often leads to a poor attitude and bad behavior. In this case, the elder brother disrespects his father by not attending the party that is in his Father’s honor (for the restored relationship with his Prodigal Son). Both brothers have a fractured relationship with their father, one treating the father as if he were dead, the other thinking of his father as his master and keeper. Neither fulfilled the spirit of the commandment to honor ones parents.

This weekend, the Plebe Class honors their parents for their part in getting their sons and daughters to this stage of their lives. It is a reflective time, as Plebe Summer concludes, the Brigade reforms and the academic year looms large. Our relationship with our parents and extended family is the living laboratory for future relationships. In our parable, the father loves his sons, goes out to each [one returning on the road (15:20); one in the field (15:28)], and is generous to both. The father is an image of God, exercising self-control in his relationship with his sons, even when both brothers fail to do the same.

For our earthly parents, sometimes they get it right and sometimes they fail. In their success and failure, we learn about self-control or the consequences in its absence. If our parents were monogamous, enjoyed alcohol in moderation, and managed finances well, to name just a few aspects of an ordered life, we recognize the self-control that was required. If relatives were promiscuous, alcoholics, and spendthrifts, we know the devastation wrought. Regardless of upbringing, we remain responsible for our own behavior.

We can exercise self-control, even if it was lacking in those who raised us. We know that there is no such thing as friends with benefits! Sexual promiscuity is hurtful, straining relationships. We know that abuse of alcohol can be devastating. Living for the moment, squandering our resources, does not conform to God’s will. Let Jesus take the wheel. Pray for the Holy Spirit
to assist you in exercising self-control. If there are aspects of your life where self-control has been lacking, repent.

The parable of the Prodigal Son is preceded by two other parables that conclude with a statement regarding repentance - The Parable of the Lost Sheep (15:3-7) and the Parable of the Lost Coin (15:8-10). Certainly a lost sheep does not repent, nor does a lost coin. In these instances, repentance must refer to a willingness to be found. Do we embrace God the Father who finds us in Jesus Christ? Do we admit that we are the lost sheep, the lost coin, the Prodigal Son? Can we celebrate repentance?

Carrie Underwood sings about a mother who admits that she is lost. After spinning out of control on the black-ice, the lyrics continue:

It was still getting colder when she made it to the shoulder
And the car came to a stop
She cried when she saw that baby in the backseat, sleeping like a rock
And for the first time in a long time
She bowed her head to pray
She said I'm sorry for the way
I've been living my life
I know I've got to change
So from now on, tonight

Jesus take the wheel
Take it from my hands
Cause I can't do this on my own
I'm letting go
So give me one more chance
Save me from this road I'm on
Oh, Jesus take the wheel

Amen.