

## **“Giving Up Control”**

Dear friends, Greetings this morning in the name of our Lord Jesus.

Today we're starting a series that we hope will help reinforce what is already happening in (many of) your lives, in your faith-walk with Jesus, as well as challenge you in ways that might lead you to rethink and reexamine (and maybe even change) some of what you've been doing. In the Christian life, from beginning to end, it's really nothing more than that; it's a daily re-thinking and re-evaluating and remembering who we are as God's people, what he's done for us (in Jesus), and how (as his followers), he is now calling us to live.

Before getting into it, let me say that this series might, in some ways, feel a bit “premature” in its start-date. At least on the surface, based on the title, “Give It Up,” it might feel as if it would better if we had held off for a couple of weeks before starting.

Now, we're not quite there yet, but in just over two weeks, we move into the season of Lent. Lent is a time, (in the Church year), for 40 days, (leading up to the celebration of Easter), when we focus on the sacrifice Jesus made for us as he went to the cross. We think, during that (40-day period), about what our Lord “gave up” for us as he walked a path that would eventually lead to his death.

One of the longstanding traditions, associated with that season, is the practice of “giving up” things, during those same 40 days. People make sacrifices, giving up things like a favorite food, a favorite drink; they might give up television or video games or whatever it is that would remind them of what our Lord did (for them) as he went to the cross. It's a good and longstanding tradition.

This series, at least in its title, is picking up on this same idea of “giving up something” as a result of the relationship we have with Jesus. The difference is (in this series), in Lent, it's for 40 days, reminding us of Jesus gave up for us. In this series, it's not tied to the Lenten season at all, but (more foundationally) to the calling we have in Jesus (to be his followers) and to the claim he has made on our lives from the time we were baptized, until that day when we're called home to be with him forever.

As his children, his followers, his disciples, there are things Jesus has called us (in life) to “give up.” There are things he wants us to let go of (in our lives) and to never reclaim again.

In this series, we're going to be talking about (some of those things) we're called to give up, and not just for 40 days (in Lent), but for all of the days (we're given) in life. We're also going to be talking about how God, in calling us to “give up things” that stand in the way of our relationship with him, how he also promises (in that calling) to fill those same things, those same places, (where we've given up something), with something even greater.

Today, we're taking on the topic of control. In our relationship with God, in Jesus, in living and in following him, God wants us to let go of our need for control.

To get us going today, in this series, (on this topic), I don't know how many of you know someone who likes to control things, anyone in your life who likes to be in control. (Raise your hand if you know someone who likes to always be in control.)

Now, if they're (here today), don't look at them. That's not what I meant. (I don't want this to get ugly.) Let's not make a scene. I don't know how many of you know someone who likes to control things, if you like to control things yourself.

If you do, there's nothing (inherently) wrong with that. (There isn't.) There's nothing wrong with being in control. In fact, I've known a lot of “out-of-control” people (over the years), seen a lot of “un-controlled” lives. It's never God-pleasing. It's much better to be in control than to not have any control at all.

When it comes to children, parents need to have control. (A lot of parents don't have it.) In families, there needs to be control from within. (It always works better, when there is.) Singles and couples and friendships, in marriage, at work, (no matter where it is), in being a teacher or a student, if there's no control, no one who has control, then it all starts to unravel, and (when that happens), no one wins. Having control is important.

At the same time, if our need and desire to have control stands in the way of the relationships we have with other people, then our need to control things can easily lead to things being out of control. And what's true in our relationships with others is even "more true" in our relationship with God.

"Giving Up Control." Let's talk for a moment about one of the passages we just read. Our first lesson today was that familiar story of what happened (early on) when our world was first created. When it all started, there was no question that God was the one in control. He was the one who created the world. He was the one who created people. He put them in a garden and (for the most part) gave them "free reign." (They could do almost anything they wanted.)

There was only one thing they were told not to do, and that's what they ended up doing. There was only one tree they were commanded (from which) not to eat. And that was the one tree "from which" they could not stay away.

You know the story. That crafty old serpent, that sly and deceptive snake. (Remember his question?) Remember what he said? "Did God really say, 'You shall not eat of its fruit?'" Did God really command that (it's that one tree) "away from which" you must remain?"

I don't know what it is about being told "not to do something" that makes "doing it" even more tempting? I don't why it is that when God says "You'll be better off, if you don't," that we have this inner desire (and tendency) to want to find out?

That's a good question. (Just think about it.) Do we actually think we know better than God? Do actually believe that our "desired approach" will end up in a better place than his "original design"? Or does (the problem we're dealing with) go beyond that? Is the trouble (we face) in life, even deeper than that? Could it be that what we (actually want) "more than anything", (even ahead of God), is to have the final say?

This idea of "controlling things" goes way back. It's part of those opening chapters in the Bible. It's what ultimately led to that original sin. And because it was "original," it keeps getting passed on.

Do you know what I inherited from my parents, besides the color of my eyes and my skin? Do you know what they inherited from theirs, and they from theirs, all the way back? Do you know what Mary and I passed on to our four kids, the one gift they never had a chance or a choice to reject?

With that first sin, (that original sin), it was all a matter of control. In that first garden, it all came down to "Who is it?" that will have the final say. (You know what happened.) Adam and Eve thought they had a better plan. (You know how it worked.) Those first people, they thought had a better way. And so they ate, and so they (soon) had to hide, and so every one of us has been wearing our "fig leaves" ever since.

"Giving Up Control." We need it in life, to keep thing in order. We need to give it up in life, if we want things to last. It's strange how it works (in the Christian life), so many things that seem like they don't fit. It's only when they (don't seem to fit) that they actually do.

Go down the list of the things Jesus told us. If you want to save your life, you need to lose it. If you want to be first, then move to the end of the line. Leaders need to be followers. To be rich, you need to first become poor. The least will become the greatest. To be healed and find joy (in life), it's only going to happen when you're broken and begin to cry.

It's the same with control. If you want to have it (in your life), then you're better off leaving it in the hands of God. If you hope to (keep it) in your life, then you better make sure it belongs to him.

I could give a long list of times (in my life) when I thought I had a better way than God. (“I’ll bet you could, too.) I could, give a long list of situations (and reasons) why I thought (what I thought) might actually work.

Do you know what I’ve learned (over the years) from all of my living, from my desire (in so many settings) to want to have the final say? (Do you know what I’ve learned?) I’ve learned that when my ideas are better than God’s, that when my way of coming at life is more insightful than his, that the next time it happens, when I actually end up better (in life) as a result of doing what I think (is best), instead of what he has already told me, that the next time it happens will be the first. It’s still yet to happen.

“Giving Up Control.” If you want to have it (in life), you need to leave it with him. If you hope to keep it (in life), you’ll be better off if you let him have the final say.

Our gospel reading today was from the book of Matthew. It’s one of those stories in the Bible (from Jesus’ life) that sets the stage for almost everything that follows. (It’s a familiar story.) Matthew, Mark, Luke, they all tell it. Only John leaves it alone, but (even in his story) it’s implied. It’s one of the first things Jesus does in his ministry. It’s one of the first places the Holy Spirit leads in Jesus’ life.

You remember, out into the desert, 40 days (just like Lent), Jesus gives it all up. No food, no shelter, out with the wild animals alone. What happens at the end? Sounds a lot like what happened at the start. Along comes the devil, that slippery and smelly and slimy tempter of a snake. And it’s the same thing as in the garden. It’s the same temptation to be in control and have the final say.

“It’s easy!” the devil says. (After 40 days), all you have to do is to “Command these stones to become bread” and you can have them. All it takes for (it to happen) is for you to “throw yourself down” and let the angels do their “catching thing.” Just” bend a little knee,” just let me, only for a moment, be “your one.” If you do, “It’ll all be yours. Everything you see (and want) in life, it’ll all belong to you.”

Anyone relate to that desert story? Anyone ever been tempted with that same deceptive and life-destroying line? It’s all about control. It’s all about wanting to be in charge and have the final say. If you take it, you’ll lose it. If you want to have it, it’ll never be yours to keep.

Why do we keep doing it, when it doesn’t work? Why do we still want it, when it’s all (so much better) when we don’t?

Jesus never did want it. He never (in his life) gave in. Now, he might have wanted it, but he knew how it worked. He might even have done it, were it not for the fact that he knew.

Three times, he left control (in his life) with God. Three times, he had the chance (to grab it), but he never did. “Man does not live on bread alone...Do not put the Lord your God to the test...(and away from me, you evil and deceptive and life-sucking serpent), “For it is only God who deserves our worship and only he is the one we shall serve.”

Do you see what happened? Are you (beginning to see) how this all works? Jesus gave it all up, his opportunity to have control, and was (ultimately) able to keep it. Jesus let it all go, every chance he had, all the way to the cross, and it all stayed (and remained) with him. Only in leaving it where it belongs, will it ever be yours. Only in not wanting it for yourself, will it ever be yours to keep.

All of your worries, all of your temptations, all of the challenges and the opportunities (in life) you have? All of your passions and desires and things you want to see happen and (maybe even) avoid?

If you want to be in control, then give the control to him. If you want to keep control, be the one calling the shots, then make sure you’re (not the one) calling the shots.

Give it to him, and control will be yours. Leave it with him, and your life will be in control. It’s like so many other things in the Christian life. (Control is no different.) It only fits when it seems like it doesn’t. It only works when the one who makes it work is not us.

And so, you tell me, as we begin this (new series) together. What are you going to do with (the fruit) from that one tree? It's your garden (in life) to choose. Which temptation are you going to follow? It's your desert (in life) to live.

This whole idea of wanting to be in control, maybe it's time to "give it up"...and not just for 40 days, but for all of life. Let's pray.

Lord God, we thank you for the promise you made, long ago, to save this world (and us) in Jesus and, in so doing, to ensure that control would always remain with you. We thank you for Jesus, who fought off the temptation to take control himself, and for his willingness to follow your will all the way to the cross.

Help us, in our tendency to want to control things for ourselves, in those times and places, in our relationship with you, when we think we know better, to truly know better and leave it and entrust it to you. Fill us with your Spirit. Strengthen us in your Word. Empower us and enable us to trust in what you have said, in what you have promised, and in what you have done for us, in Jesus, that our lives might always be in your control. In his name we pray. Amen.