

DAY 2: “CONTROL FREAK? WHO ME?” LEARNING TO LET GO OF YOUR PLAN FOR HAPPINESS BECAUSE GOD’S IS BETTER



Let's open with prayer:

*In the name of the Father, of
the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*

*Lord Jesus Christ, only say
the word and my soul shall be
healed.*

Amen.

WHAT IS THE hardest thing to give up? Money? Possessions? Position? Success? We can tell from the title – the hardest thing for most people to give up is *control*. This thirst for control disrupts our relationship with God and His perfect plan for our life. But what exactly is it we want to control? The answer is not always what it seems. We're going to look at surprising facets of our desire to be in control and how it relates to an important question – *How do we love God?*

REVIEW FROM DAY 1 – GOD IS IN CONTROL

Recall from Day 1 that God is in control. God has a plan for your happiness, even amidst trials. It's important that we do our part to reinforce in our mind that God really will bring good from the trials of life. We must deeply interiorize this reality for it to sustain us during hardships. We looked at three ways that we can better understand and trust in God's plan for our happiness.

First, theology teaches, based on divine revelation, that God permits trials and challenges in life (His permissive will), but He also ordains good things to come from challenges for those who love Him (His perfect will). Trusting in God's goodness is at the heart of the Gospel message – which is Christ's core message to “repent and believe.” Specifically, to believe in God's goodness, ever-presence and omnipotence; and to trust in His plan for your life.

Second, the Old and New Testaments gives nearly endless examples of people who were saved from seemingly hopeless situations and overcame flaws, failures and misfortune by trusting in God's faithfulness.

And third, we can all point to situations in our lives, from the lives of the Saints, and of others, that seemed hopeless, but where good was ultimately brought from trials and suffering.

In a perfect world this should be the end of our retreat. We've established that God is in control and that is a good thing because His plan for our life is perfect – there is not a single thing we can do to improve upon it, even at those times when it's not to our liking (“My ways are not your ways”). But we live in a fallen world with our fallen nature which makes it difficult to curb our craving for control and turn our lives over to God.

Today we will look at how our worries drive our desire to control the future, how we attempt to control the past through our anger and resentment, and how our desire to control our present circumstances blind us to God's goodness amidst trials.

THE KEY TO THIS RETREAT

The key to all of this was well-said by St. Augustine: “Trust the past to God’s mercy, the present to God’s love, and the future to God’s providence.”

Let’s take a close look at each of these three time frames.

#1 - WORRIES AND TRYING TO CONTROL THE FUTURE

We Crave Control

Human beings crave control. It first showed up in a certain garden and had to do with an apple. This craving is a problem because we can’t have both God in control of our life and us in control of our life. Only one person gets to hold the remote...

But it’s very hard for us to let go of that desire for control. Likewise we delude ourselves into thinking we can attain that control.

Our illusion of control is reinforced a thousand ways each day. Most of them small, but they add up. Is the shower too cold? Too hot? The coffee not sweet enough? How many outfits should we try on today? Which radio station or podcast? Do we want to answer that call or not? Think of all the decisions and adjustments you make each day to tailor your environment and activities to suit your desires and preferences.

Almost everything we do these days reinforces the mirage that we have control.

Now, there is nothing new about this. Along with that certain garden incident, every event in the bible somehow relates to the conflict of man seeking to do his will over God’s.

It just so happens that modern life allows us to manipulate our environment to a stunning degree.

Here’s the thing – we don’t simply want to control our environment and our actions – it turns out that our desire for control runs much, much deeper.

We Don't Just Want to Control What We Do – We Want to Control Outcomes

One of the biggest problems with our hunger for control is that we seek to extend our grasp into the mythical land of outcomes. We don't just want to control what we *do*, we want to control *how it turns out*.

We set up remarkably sophisticated systems of behavioral controls and have high expectations for their outcomes. In fact, we constantly analyze patterns to determine how to get the outcome we desire:

If I study this way, I'll get the grades I need to get into the college of my choice.

If I do this exercise program, I'll get the figure I desire.

Here's a particularly damaging pattern - *if I do things for people they'll be nice to me* - and it's evil twin - *if I'm nice to people they'll do things for me*.

The world around us actually understands this quite well. *Buy this product, wear these clothes, go on this exercise program, go on this vacation, take this course ... and you will get the outcome you desire.*

Now, there's nothing wrong with being mindful of the future. It's all a matter of the proper ordering of our will and God's will. Here's the two-part test for whether we're going down the dark path of control:

1. Are we striving to bring about our version of the future or God's?
2. Is our planning for the future overwhelming our ability to live in the grace of the present moment?

Question #1 reminds us that we must always be seeking to do God's will rather than bend the future to our will. We should always be endeavoring to remain close to God and discern His will for our life (more on this on Day 5).

But what about the times when we do consult with God but remain

uncertain whether we're following His plan or ours? This brings us to Question #2. We need to be observant of what is happening in the present. If the plan we're following is robbing us of receiving God's grace in the present, we're probably veering off target.

Let's look at studying for a test. Is there anything wrong with that? Does it violate Question #1? Not in and of itself. God's plan for our future includes making the most of our intellectual ability. But what about Question #2? What if we become obsessed with getting the top grade, rather than studying for the love of learning and making the most of our God-given gifts? What if that obsession blinds us to other work God might be calling us to in the present moment? If so, we're now becoming addicted to controlling outcomes rather than living virtuously in the moment and trusting in God's plan.

We Don't Just Want to Control Outcomes – We Want to Control Our Own Happiness

Now we come to the last stop on the control rollercoaster ride. We not only want to control what we do. Nor do we only want to control outcomes. What we really want to control is how we feel. In fact, we want to control whether or not we feel happy.

The two big problems with all this are that (1) we never really have control and (2) we are terrible judges of what will make us genuinely happy.

This double dose of reality is the source of our worries. Let's look at each.

Control is an Illusion

We don't really control outcomes.

What's more, outcomes reside in the land of tomorrow.

We certainly don't control tomorrow. We don't control 10 seconds from now.

Should we reasonably prepare for the future? Certainly – that's the virtue of prudence. In the present moment, when appropriate, we should consider and act on thoughts like, "what are the reasonable

things to do for the future.” But it is unreasonable to base our life on the expectation that we can manipulate events to guarantee an exterior environment that will make us happy.

What happens is that we get used to patterns (if I do *this*, *that* will happen) and those patterns give us a false sense of control and we build our life around that false sense of order. Until, inevitably, we come to the exception to the pattern, and then things unravel in a hurry.

We face this again and again, each time we butt up against the unexpected. Oh, how unwelcome is the *unexpected*! Health problems. Money problems. Relationship problems. Even “good” unexpected happenings are often a curse in disguise. How many happy lottery winners have you read about? And then there’s the ultimate lack of control – death.

Our Plan for Happiness Is Not So Happy

Even if we could achieve our plan for control, it wouldn’t deliver the true happiness we desire.

The illusion of control is what prompted Solomon to bemoan “vanity of vanities.” He was looking for control and happiness in all the wrong places. Solomon commanded all that the world could offer – wealth, power, fame, adulation. He was a man in complete control of his exterior circumstances. In the end he found that none of it satisfied. None of it brought happiness. Thus, “all is vanity.” Which is to say, all worldly schemes for happiness will ultimately fail to satisfy us.

Jesus shows us the source of true happiness, defined first and foremost in the two great commandments – love God and love neighbor. And Jesus shows us how to live that out by His example (His complete self-giving) and teaching (particularly in the Sermon on the Mount). Put differently, for the Christian, happiness and holiness are the same.

Worries - the SOLUTION: Trust the Future to God's Providence

The response to worries is simply to let go of the future and trust in God's plan for our future. "Oh, is that all?" In fact it is.

Here are three simple actions to help us "let go, and let God":

1. Meditate on Matthew 6:25-32 ("Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink....") Should we use our God-given intellect to make reasonable plans for the future? Sure. But we should detach ourselves from any expectations of how the future will actually play out. Meditating on the living Word of God is a powerful way to interiorize the Truth that God reveals to us in sacred scripture.
2. Seek examples to remind yourself that your vision and plan for the future is not reliable, but God's vision and plan is! We all have experiences of forcing the outcome we desired and finding it was not so rosy. Vice versa, we have experiences of a dreaded event turning out to be not so bad after all. Relive these experiences and bring them to God in meditation.
3. Practice detachment. Find a few small ways each day to give up a little control. When your phone rings, answer it even if you were not planning on having a conversation at that moment. Or, set the shower a little cooler than normal. Or, order the first thing that presents itself at a restaurant rather than pouring over the menu for the perfect item. Practicing trust and detachment in small doses of daily activity strengthens our trust muscles for the genuine trials of life that inevitably come.

#2 - WOUNDS AND BEING CONTROLLED BY THE PAST

Wounds from past events may be self-inflicted, in which case we suffer regret and self-condemnation. Or, the wounds may simply be from the misfortunes of life, and we experience a deep frustration. Or, the wounds may be inflicted by others, and stir up anger and resentment.

Anger and Resentment

“Anger as a deadly sin is ‘a disorderly outburst of emotion connected with the inordinate desire for revenge.’ . . . It is likely to be accompanied by surliness of heart, by malice aforethought, and above all by the determination to take vengeance.” (Fairlie, *The Seven Deadly Sins Today*)

A passing feeling of anger is not an issue – what matters is what we do with it. Do we let it pass or do we invite it into our interior and nurture it?

That kind of interior invitation leads to sinful anger, or wrath, and is tied to a desire for revenge. That is resentment - rightly or wrongly, we believe we experienced an injustice, and we want to extract retribution. In most situations, we’re not in a position to get what we think is due to us, so we extract what retribution we can through our self-righteous anger.

There are several ways we go about this. There is the passive-aggressive response – we don’t actually show our anger but find discrete ways to act on it – we talk behind someone’s back, or we allow them to suffer some trouble that we could have helped avoid. Or we may resort to the silent treatment. Or we simply stew in our anger with endless dialogues in our head.

Regrets and Frustrations

Regrets are not simply emotions – they are a potent combination of past events, feelings and imagination. Regrets can be a powerful source of anger and other emotional and spiritual negativity. Regrets have a way of resurfacing and robbing us of our peace. The rotten fruits of regret are manifold: guilt, self-loathing, anger at others, anger at God, fear of consequences from past mistakes, and fear of repeating past mistakes, just to name a few. The problem is that, in our pride, we think we ought to be more than we are, and we grow angry with our past-self and the inconvenient reality of the consequences of our mistakes.

We also carry with us frustrations at the injustices of life. The loss

of a job. A challenging medical condition. Political unrest. You name it. These lead to self-pity and an amorphous anger that is directed at society, or “the universe,” or God Himself.

Again We Encounter Our Attempts at Control

In every disordered response to past wounds we encounter our attempt at control. Whether we are trying to extract retribution from others, or failing to own up to past mistakes or unwilling to accept the trials that come with life in a fallen world, anger is often our last resort to claim what little control we can in the face of perceived injustice.

The futility of all this, as is often pointed out, is that wrathful anger actually has the opposite effect - it simply gives control over to whatever is making us angry.

Wounds - the SOLUTION: Trust the Past to God’s Mercy

Starting with self-focused anger in the form of regret of past sins, we first need to seek God’s forgiveness. For Catholics the fullness of God’s mercy is found in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. For non-Catholics a Prayer of Perfect Contrition is a good starting point (copied below). As we’re doing this, trite as it sounds, we also need to forgive ourselves. As previously mentioned, in our pride we think we ought to be more than we are, and we tend to hold grudges against our “past self.”

We start off by seeking God’s forgiveness because we cannot offer to others what we have not received.

We then need to extend forgiveness to everyone we are angry with or hold a grudge against. “Forgiveness is not the same as reconciliation” is the operative principle here. You don’t necessarily even need to forgive the person directly. You first need to forgive them, in the name of Jesus, in your heart. St. Paul tells us:

“Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you, with all malice, and be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.” (Eph. 4:31–32)

Forgiveness is challenging, so trust in this – forgiveness is a decision not a feeling. If we choose to forgive someone in Christ, they are forgiven. We may not feel it. The sting of their betrayal may extend well into the future, but that does not undue the forgiveness. It's similar to major surgery. If it was successful, that is the end of the story. Recuperation and feelings of the pain of healing may last for some time, but the surgery was successful and over with, nonetheless.

Finally, we need to let go of anger at the “random” hardships of life, like a physical ailment. First, if we’re angry at God, we need to repent and confess that anger to Him. Second, we have to learn to accept hardships in this life. Christ himself experienced and patiently accepted all the hardships and inconveniences of life; we shouldn’t expect any different experience for ourselves.

All this forgiving and accepting, while simple in concept, can indeed be difficult in practice. Our memories and emotions are powerful, and the enemy of our peace will stir them up to harass and deter us. It takes time to heal and purify our memories and emotions and turn our will ever more to God. We will spend the next three days on that topic.

#3 - TRUSTING GOD'S GOODNESS IN OUR PRESENT TRIALS

Trials are Inevitable

We’ve established that we’re not actually in control, and even if we were it would do us no good because our definition of the happiness we’re trying to control is probably off the mark.

In that context, trials and tribulations can be blessings if we receive them as a control freak cold turkey program – forcing us to relinquish our illusion of control and to trust in God’s plan.

What’s more, when we learn to accept life’s trials and hardships we transform them into opportunities of grace (more on that Day 5).

We must also avoid attempting to dodge suffering by living in a

future fantasyland. We only encounter God in the present. We can only be sanctified and transformed in the present.

But, if all we take from a crisis is anger and frustration at our loss of control, or just as dangerous, adopt a mindset that “I’m going to be even more prepared to be in control next time,” we’ll have lost the grace of the moment to grow closer to God.

This discussion of trials is not meant to be flippant. It is certainly easier to apply this to the more “garden variety” crosses of routine challenges and short-term crises. But there, of course, many great crosses in life, such as the loss or suffering of a loved one or living with chronic pain or clinical depression. It is much easier to practice the principles of this retreat on the smaller crosses of life, in preparation for the inevitably greater trials. If you are in the midst of a major trial, be assured that the principles of this retreat will help you to lean on the Lord, even if our practical examples tend to reflect the more ordinary variety of trials that we encounter on a daily basis.

Trials - the SOLUTION: Trust the Present to God’s Love

Trust is one of those virtues that grows through tribulation (see Romans 5:3-5). Our faith and trust grow when we prevail over adversity by the grace of God. Here are some approaches to take when you are in the midst of trials:

1. **Accept.** We must accept the reality of our pain and suffering without becoming embittered. “We accept good things from God should we not accept evil?” (Job 2:10) God permits evil and will bring good from it. As painful as it can be, we must embrace our present circumstances, no matter how trying, and cling to God, trusting in His plan for our life.

2. **Don’t just accept - pray for acceptance.** It is not easy to accept evil in our lives and trust that God will bring good from pain and suffering. We must pray for that grace.

3. **Look to Jesus.** Jesus Christ sanctified suffering, most perfectly on the Cross. The greatest good (the resurrection) came from the greatest evil (the crucifixion). Christ Himself encourages

us to embrace our crosses, because we draw particularly close to Him when we do so. “By his passion and death on the cross Christ has given a new meaning to suffering: it can henceforth configure us to him and unite us with his redemptive passion.” (CCC 1505)

4. Offer your pain and suffering. “Offer it up” has become something of a catch phrase, but it reveals a great truth. Christ told us that some things can only be accomplished through prayer and suffering (or fasting). When we offer our suffering to God it becomes meritorious, a source of grace. Try offering your pain and suffering for loved ones or for the Church and be consoled in knowing that you are, by God’s grace, transforming your pain and suffering into miracles in someone else’s life. It is in this spirit that St. Paul declared, “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ.” (Col 1:24)

HEALTHY OCCASIONS OF AGITATION AND ANXIETY

In some instances negative emotions such as frustration or anxiety may be healthy and showing us that an area of our life needs genuine attention. For example, if we might experience anxiety because we’re prone to procrastination and are not attending to our duties in a timely and responsible manner. In that scenario, the anxiety can be seen as a healthy alert that we need to make changes. Spirit-led self-reflection and discernment, which are part of the next three days of this retreat, are the key to sorting out healthy and unhealthy emotional responses and their root cause.

Taking this concept further, God also permits “hard consolation” if we are living in persistent, serious sin. In the words of St. Ignatius, God will allow a “biting and stinging” of our conscience. For example, if someone is having an extramarital affair, they will indeed experience lack of peace in the present and worry for the future. In that case, those are valid responses – they are signs of spiritual life – of a conscience that has not been completely deadened by worldliness.

This is covered much more in 30 Days to Christian Meditation,

but it is important to mention here – if you think this applies to you, it is vitally important that you get the support you need to turn to God, repent, and break the pattern of sin. Receive this retreat as God’s call for you to return to Him and take hold of the freedom, peace and happiness He desires for you.

SURRENDERING CONTROL AND LETTING GOD LOVE YOU

Here’s a final question for today - how do we practice our love for God?

We can’t send him greeting cards or a muffin basket. It’s very true that we can love and serve our neighbor – and that is an exceedingly good way to respond to God’s love for us. But how do we love Him directly?

First and foremost, we love God by letting him love us. “In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us first” (1 John 4:10)

Here’s the kicker - we can’t let God love us if we don’t trust Him. And we trust God by letting God be God. We must be small and humble so that he can be large in our life.

So, if you’re going through a trial, now is the time to grow in faith and trust in God. Pray and pray again, “Jesus, I trust in you” and give no quarter to doubts, anger or fear. There have been occasions when I’ve prayed that prayer hundreds of times back-to-back, and never has He failed me.

After all, He’s the one who’s in charge.

SPIRITUAL TAKE-AWAYS FOR DAY 2

We crave control over not only what we do, but the outcomes of our actions and the happiness that we think we’ll derive from those outcomes.

In reality, we have very little control. The patterns we set up in life

(if I do this, the outcome I desire will happen) are inevitably disrupted by unexpected trials and setbacks.

And in reality, even if we had perfect control over our life, like King Solomon thought he had, we would find that our plan for happiness misses the mark.

We have to give up our hunger for control and learn to trust in God's plan for our happiness.

Reflect on examples from your life that remind you that your plan for happiness is often off the mark.

Practice detachment. Find a few small ways each day that you can give up a little control. When your phone rings answer it even if you were not planning on having a conversation at that moment. Or, order the first thing that presents itself at a restaurant rather than pouring over the menu for the perfect item.

Let's close in prayer:

Heavenly Father, thank you for your love for me and your plan for my life. Please raise up in my mind and heart what you desire for me from this day of the retreat. Amen.

DAY 2 POSTSCRIPT: ACT OF PERFECT CONTRITION

Forgive me my sins, O Lord, forgive my sins of my youth, the sins of my age, the sins of my soul, the sins of my body, my idle sins, my serious voluntary sins, the sins I know, the sins I do not know: the sins I have concealed so long, and which are now hidden from my memory.

I am truly sorry for every sin, mortal and venial, for all the sins of my childhood up to the present hour.

I know my sins have wounded Thy Tender Heart, O my Savior, let me be freed from the bonds of evil through thy most bitter passion, death and resurrection, Jesus my precious Lord, forget and forgive what I have been.

In the name of the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.