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Don't Eat the Marshmallow

Luke 24:44-49

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In the late nineteen-sixties an experiment took place at Stanford University in which four-year-old children were invited into a room with a chair and a desk. Once seated, the kids were invited to pick a treat from a tray that included marshmallows, cookies, and pretzel sticks. A researcher asked a girl named Carolyn to pick a treat and she chose the marshmallow. Now 44 years old, she still has a weakness for those air-puffed balls of corn syrup and gelatine. *"I know I shouldn't like them,"* she says, *"But they're just so delicious!"* The researcher then made Carolyn an offer: she could eat one marshmallow right away or, **if she was willing to wait** while he stepped out for a few minutes, she could have two marshmallows when he returned. If she rang a bell on the desk while he was away he would come running back, and she could eat one marshmallow immediately but would forfeit the second.

Most of the kids in the study struggled to resist the treat and held out for an average of less than 3 minutes. Walter Mischel, the Stanford professor of psychology in charge of the experiment recalls, *"A few kids ate the marshmallow right away, they didn't even bother ringing the bell. Other kids would stare directly at the marshmallow and then ring the bell thirty seconds later."* About thirty percent of the children were like Carolyn, they successfully delayed gratification, waiting until the researchers returned, some fifteen minutes later. The kids wrestled with waiting and temptation but found a way to resist.

Following up years later Professor Mischel found that the children who rang the bell quickly and ate the marshmallow right away were more likely to have behavioral problems in school and home, they got lower S.A.T. scores. They struggled in stressful situations, found it difficult to maintain friendships, and often had trouble paying attention. *Are you following what I'm saying?*

The children who *could wait* fifteen minutes to snag an extra marshmallow had an S.A.T. score that was, on average, 210 points higher than that of a kid who could wait only thirty seconds. Basically, children who are able to pass the marshmallow test enjoy greater success as adults.

Dr. Mischel argues that intelligence is largely at the mercy of self-control. *"We can't control the world, but we can control how we think about it."*

"We should say (to kids), 'You see this marshmallow, you don't have to eat it. You can wait. Here's how.'" **The key is to direct our attention so that our decisions are not**

determined by the wrong thoughts. *“Once you realize that will power is just a matter of learning how to control your attention and thoughts, you can really begin to increase it.”¹* That means learning how to wait.

One of our family’s favorite movies is the delightful 1987 film, *The Princess Bride*. In the movie, Cary Elwes plays the hero Westley and Mandy Patinkin, plays Inigo Montoya, who is seeking to get revenge on a six-fingered man who murdered his father twenty years before. In the scene where they meet, Inigo is waiting to kill Westley who is clinging to the side of “the cliffs of insanity,” trying not to fall while he inches his way upward.

Inigo Montoya speaks: *I do not suppose you could speed things up?*

Westley replies: *If you’re in such a hurry, you could lower a rope or a tree branch or find something useful to do.*

Inigo: *I could do that. I have some rope up here, but I do not think you would accept my help, since I am only waiting around to kill you.*

Westley: *That does put a damper on our relationship.*

Inigo mutters, *“I hate waiting,”* and then offers to help Westley to the top alive.

I often think of Inigo’s line, *“I hate waiting.”*

Waiting does not come easily to me and I think I have a lot of company and not just four-year-old kids with marshmallows.

We read in many places in the Bible about waiting, waiting on God, waiting for God, about being patient. But it is still a struggle. **It takes self-control to wait.** At the end of the Gospel of Luke, the risen Christ speaks to his followers (Luke 24:44-49), “Then he said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you—that everything written about me in the law of Moses, the prophets, and the psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds to understand the scriptures, and he said to them, “Thus it is written, that the Messiah is to suffer and to rise from the dead on the third day, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And see, I am sending upon you what my Father promised; **so stay here** in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

¹ Jonah Lehrer, article, Don’t! The Secret of Self-Control, The New Yorker Magazine, May 18, 2009, pages 26-32.

Jesus explains to the disciples what happened to him, what it all means and that it needs to be proclaimed to all nations – they must have been ready to charge out of Jerusalem like a sprinter exploding out of the starting blocks - then Jesus tells them *“On your mark, get set - **wait, stay** in Jerusalem until you have been clothed with power from on high,”* that is, until they have received the Holy Spirit.

As I think about the disciples I imagine they would be anxious to get out of town – to leave the area of Jerusalem where Jesus was recently killed, and get out and share with others the incredible events they have witnessed. But Jesus tells them they have to wait, they must stay where they are until the Holy Spirit comes and empowers them. They might have felt a little like Westley clinging to the cliffs of insanity. They are hanging on. They are watching and waiting.

We all often find ourselves in a position of waiting. When we do, we are wise to make the best use of the time. I was taught never to go anywhere without a book, because you never know when you may end up waiting. Folks today have recast that thought to, *“Never go anywhere without your cell phone and your iPod,”* or something similar because you can listen to music, call or text until your battery dies. Regardless, rather than *“wasting, squandering, or killing time,”* waiting *can be* a blessing and a chance to learn or grow. If you’re killing time today, you’re killing your future tomorrow. If we wait on the Lord, in praise or worship, in prayer or reading we may find ourselves clothed with power from on high rather than frustrated when we are waiting.

There is good waiting and bad waiting. Examples of Bad waiting are things like getting stuck in traffic, especially when you are late or it happens when or where you don’t expect it; waiting in a doctor’s office for an appointment that always ends up being an hour later than they told you to get there. Bad waiting is waiting that appears to be useless, meaningless, a waste of time, or that dreaded time before we fear being given bad news. Waiting for a loved one who is away in the service – not knowing how he or she is doing, wondering if they will get back home safely and if they do, how they will be. Good waiting is things like an expectant mother and dad waiting for a baby to be born; waiting with excitement at an airport as the passengers arrive – looking for your loved one; waiting for summer to arrive; waiting for dessert. They all involve waiting for someone or something we are looking forward to arriving.

Comedian Steven Wright likes to say, *“I took a course in speed waiting. Now I can wait an hour in only ten minutes.”*

Self-control, the ability to wait, is a key indicator of whether or not we will be

successful. By successful I mean, whether we will be able to accomplish what God wants us to accomplish. We can't control everything in life, but if there is one thing we can control and need to control, it is the self. Dr. Roy Baumeister of Case Western Reserve University said, *'If you look at the social and personal problems facing people in the United States – drug and alcohol abuse, teen pregnancy, unsafe sex, school failure, shopping problems, gambling – over and over, the majority of them have self-control failure as central to them. Studies show that self-control does predict success in life over a very long time.'* Dr. Baumeister concluded, *'If we're concerned about raising children to be successful and healthy and happy, forget about self-esteem. Concentrate on self-control.'*²

The self-control that enables us to wait has to be exercised, like a muscle. The apostle Paul says, *"Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath."* We know that all athletes do not exercise self-control in all things. Too many are in the news every week precisely because they are unable to exercise self-control when it comes to many areas of their lives and relationships. Paul's point is athletes will sacrifice and discipline themselves through hard, punishing training in order to be able to win a medal, trophy, title or championship and with it fame and fortune.

Even more important than physical training, is spiritual training. Physical exercise is a very important component of self-control and healthy living. But using self-control to learn how to wait on the Lord and to grow in godliness can have implications not only for the present, but for eternity. Our inability to control ourselves rarely impresses God or other people; in fact, it can be embarrassing and uncomfortable, to see someone lacking self-control.

It was a hot, humid day in the middle of Kansas City. The eight-hour shift seemed especially long for the veteran bus driver. Suddenly, a young woman, apparently upset about something, let loose with a string of unforgettable, not to mention unrepeatable, words. The bus driver, looking in his overhead mirror, could sense everyone around the young woman was embarrassed by the string of profanity.

Still mumbling, the angry passenger began to get off a few blocks later. As she stepped down, the bus driver calmly said, *"Madam, I believe you're leaving something behind."* She quickly turned and snapped, *"Oh? And what is that?"* *"A very bad impression,"* the bus driver responded.³

² Pat Williams with James D. Denney, *A Lifetime of Success*, (Grand Rapids, Revell, 2000), 106-108.

³ Zig Ziglar, *Something Else to Smile About* (Thomas Nelson, 1999).

Proverbs 25:26 says, *“Like a city breached without walls, is one who lacks self-control.”* **Self-control is mastering our passions and emotions so they don’t get the best of us and bring out the worst in us.**

Paul tells us to practice self-control and learn to wait for a spiritual purpose.

Titus 2:11-14, *“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, **while we wait for the blessed hope** and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.”*

John Stott in his excellent sermon, *A Vision For Holiness*, explains the relationship between love and self-control.

“Buddha once said, ‘If one person conquers in battle a thousand times a thousand, and another conquers himself, he who conquers himself is the greatest of all conquerors.’

But how much do we know about self-conquest, self-mastery, and self-control?

Why do I say that love is balanced by self-control? Because love is self-giving, and self-giving and self-control are complementary, the one to the other.

How can we give ourselves in love until we’ve learned to control ourselves?

Our self has to be mastered before it can offered in the service of others.”

American Poet Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s poem, *A Psalm of Life*, talks about the balance between acting with faith and courage each day while also learning to wait. Picture the disciples at the end of Luke’s gospel, gathered around, thinking about all that has happened with the crucifixion of Jesus and his rising from the grave, the task that lies before them to take the good news to the nations, and Jesus’ instruction to wait. Imagine them hearing the words of the poem along with us:

Tell me not in mournful numbers,
Life is but an empty dream!
For the soul is dead that slumbers,
And things are not what they seem.

Life is real! Life is earnest!
And the grave is not its goal;
Dust thou art, to dust thou returnest,
Was not spoken of the soul.

Not enjoyment, and not sorrow,
Is our destined end or way;
**But to act, that each tomorrow
Find us farther than today.**

Art is long, and Time is fleeting,
And our hearts, though stout and brave,
Still, like muffled drums, are beating
Funeral marches to the grave.

In the world's broad field of battle,
In the bivouac of Life,
Be not like dumb, driven cattle!
Be a hero in the strife!

Trust no Future, howe'er pleasant!
Let the dead Past bury its dead!
**Act, - act in the living Present!
Heart within, and God o'erhead!**

Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sand of time;

Footprints, that perhaps another,
Sailing o'er life's solemn main,
A forlorn and shipwrecked brother,
Seeing, shall take heart again.

**Let us then be up and doing,
With a heart for any fate;**

**Still achieving, still pursuing,
Learn to labor and to wait.**

Jesus told the disciples to wait in Jerusalem until they were filled with the power of God's Spirit. They could have eaten the marshmallow right away, but they waited. They worshiped, they prayed, they shared their stories and experiences with Jesus, they continued to build community, they waited. They ended up waiting 40 days and then something incredible happened. But that story will have to wait until next Sunday.

If you want to eat the marshmallow, now, you may.

Blessing

“How wonderful it is that nobody need wait a single moment before starting to improve the world.”

Anne Frank quotes (German Jewish girl Author of a diary of her family's two years in hiding during World War II, 1929-1945)

“For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline.” 2 Timothy 1:7 New Living Translation