Next Steps

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Preacher: Steve Jeffrey

[0:00] Thank you, Michelle, and welcome everyone to church this morning.

! It's great to see you. I am Steve. I've never met you before. I'm senior pastor here at St. Paul's. As Nick said, we're closing off our vision series for this morning. So if you keep your Bibles open there, 1 Corinthians 9, that'd be fantastic.
The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche was a classical scholar and a self-confessed critic, particularly of the Christian faith, religion generally, but particularly the Christian faith.
He once said that he would believe in the Redeemer, that is Jesus, if the redeemed Christians looked a little more redeemed.
He was making the point that from the Christians that he knew, that he never really got the impression that there was, in fact, a God who created all things.
[1:02] You never get the impression that humanity was made in a special relationship and in the image of God, in a special relationship with him. You never get the opinion at all that this humanity inexplicably set their hearts on something else than their creator God.

They destroyed themselves in the world, and yet this God rescued them by coming into his story, and that this God rescued them by coming into his story, dying on a cross, and rose triumphantly, and now reigns and rules over all things decisively, giving them the gift of eternal life in his presence forever, where he will restore everything and all evil and sin.
He said, you would never get the opinion that Christians believe that. That was his point. In fact, Nietzsche said, another one of his great quotes is, there's really only one true Christian, and he died on a cross.
Nietzsche's point was that if that is, in fact, what Christians believed, then why does it seem to make such little difference in the way that they live their lives?
Why aren't they exceedingly joyous? Why aren't they living lives shaped by that truth? And that really is what our series has been about this year, this term, our vision series.
[2:33] When I began, I mentioned that the word Christian Christian is a connection of its two words, which means two words of Christian, which means, in essence, it means followers of the Christ.

And the word Christian means a lifelong journey, following Jesus, 100% dedication to him, as he himself describes it, of taking up your cross, dying to self, being alive to him, being changed, transformed into the character of Jesus and with the priorities of Jesus.
To be a Christian is to be like Jesus, like Jesus in his complete surrender to the Father, like Jesus in his life of service of others, like Jesus in his love for all people, like Jesus in his patient endurance, like Jesus in his mission to the world to win people back into relationship with God.
And as I've said along this series, there's often a disconnect in the Christian life between those great truths, our worldview, as I said last week, and the lives that that worldview should produce.
And so this series has been looking at regular rhythms of grace, Christian practices, spiritual disciplines, as they've been traditionally called, which take those great truths of the Christian faith and to take them from the mind and push them down into the driving centre of our lives.
[4:19] And then from there, out from there, into transformation of character and priorities. That's what spiritual disciplines do.

They move. And as the great John Calvin said, a truth that's held just in the mind is actually not a truth that's lived by or actually believed in until it's pushed down into the driving centre of our lives and out from there.
And so these rhythms, if you like, are about pushing them down and about that transformation in life. And if you've been journeying through this series so far, all the way with me, I suppose my

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question is, eight weeks in, what next step have you taken?
what's different? What has changed? What are you doing differently now that you weren't doing before?
Basically, if you get up tomorrow morning and there's an entire disconnect from today, what you realise is when you look at these rhythms of life and when you start to put them into practice, what you realise is that there's a fight on all the time.
[5:56] All the time. There is for me. You should not assume that as I ascend the stairs to the office at church, there's a halo that kind of follows me.

You shouldn't assume that because this is my profession that somehow that I don't have a fight on every single day as a disciple of Jesus.
I hope you got that from the very first sermon where I basically, within three or four minutes, was vulnerable to you in terms of my own day-by-day struggles as a disciple of Jesus.
There is a fight on every day. And so what this means is that self-control is crucial in life. And that's really the message today as we look to take our next steps.
What does it mean to have a life of self-control in order to put these into practice? So if you've got the St Paul's app, you'll see three things there. The first one is the heart and self-control.
[7:03] Now, the word for self-control in 1 Corinthians 9, which is just read out to us, is actually in verse 25, even though it wasn't in the English version that was read out.

In the original language, the word there is, everyone who competes in the games goes into, the English says, strict training.
Literally, it means self-rule. Anyone who competes in the games goes into self-rule or self-control. That is, the athlete exerts self-control, self-rule in all things. The runner runs for the prize, the athlete for the crown, the boxer, which is another one there, another word, is to strike a blow. That's what they do. The boxer doesn't go into strict training in order to punch the air. They go into strict training to punch a chin or whatever it can, above the belt.
[8:05] Paul says here that he beats his body. And by that he means he is wearing down his resistance in every area of his life so that he might reach the goal.

In case, the prize is in verse 27. He says, I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.
He exercises self-control to make sure that his life itself aligns with his belief, with what he preaches.
And the secret ingredient for Paul in that is the heart. It's the heart. In modern times, we tend to think that the secret to self-control is willpower.
And particularly in Western culture, we think that the secret to self-control is willpower. You know, athletes, you know, they just have this extraordinary, powerful mind and are able to, you know, assert the will over everything.
[9:30] So if I had placed before me a bucket of Rocky Road ice cream and I want to eat it all, what I need to do is I need to convince myself that if I was to eat it all, then it would be really bad for me, really bad for me.

And so I need to assert my willpower over the desire of the heart to eat an entire bucket of Rocky Road ice cream or one of those big buckets of KFC or whatever it is that you're...
Now, so in other words, the modern concept of self-control is an exercise of the mind. It is willpower over emotions and desires and feelings, which is exactly how the ancients regarded willpower or self-control.
In ancient Greek stoicism, that was their concept of self-control. Stoicism regarded that a life lived well was a virtuous life, a good life.
Virtues, really four main ones for the Stoics was wisdom, justice, courage, and self-control. And so for the Stoics, like all of Greek culture, which Western civilization is built on, the mind, knowledge, reason was always supreme over emotions, feelings, and desires.
[11:10] They emphasized the importance of self-control and emotional regulation to navigate life well. So you can have a very strong desire for something, but self-control was to ensure that you convinced yourself of negating the desire and pursuing the rational.

If you can rid your life of desires, feelings, and emotions, then you are living a virtuous life. Now the Bible does not think of self-control as taking the mind and will and asserting it over the desires, the feelings, and the emotions.

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Primarily because in the Bible humanity is made in God's image and therefore desires, feelings, and emotions are part of who we are. It's part of the whole person.
But verse 25 gives us the Bible's key to self-rule, self-control. Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training, goes into self-rule.
They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we, and he's referring to Christians here, we do it to get a crown that will last forever.
[12:35] What Paul's saying here, the Bible's view is, it's not that an athlete doesn't want to eat a bucket of Rocky Road ice cream, or their equivalent.

it's not that they don't want to stay up all night with their friends and party. It's not that they don't want to sleep in every day or most days, particularly if they're teenagers.
And they don't really want the fatigue, they don't really want the exertion, and they don't really want the expenses, and they don't really want the injuries.
But what they do want, more than anything else, is the prize, the crown, the medal. That's what they want.
You see, self-control is not a matter of the will, it's a matter of the heart, it's a matter of what it is that you set your desire on. it's a matter of what you have affections for.
[13:53] Self-control is about setting the heart, the driving centre of the life, which is the way the Bible understands it, on the nobler, higher, and most important, greater thing.

Self-control is not that some people have a stronger will than others, or less feelings and emotions and desires than others.
It's a matter of what we set our hearts on. What we desire the most, the thing that the heart most wants, orders all of the other desires of the heart.
self-control is about setting our hearts and our desires on the one major want in life, and that major want will order all the other major wants in life, even as a diabetic.
Frankly, there are times when I would love to eat a bucket of Rocky Road ice cream. But, more than a love for Rocky Road ice cream is a love to be alive, a love to be healthy, a love to be functioning, a love for all of my limbs to stay attached, and for me not to be blind, for instance.
[15:28] That is a greater love for me than Rocky Road ice cream. The higher want or love or desire will always win, always win.

What main thing we set our hearts on is the thing that we will think, it's the thing that we think will fill our deepest longings of our heart.
will make us something, that will set us apart. The thing that we think will make us win will always win.
Thomas Chalmers was a Scottish Presbyterian minister, professor of theology, he was a political economist. He's been referred to once upon a time as Scotland's greatest 19th century churchman.
He preached a very famous sermon called The Expulsive Power of a New Affection. He made the powerful point that bondage to sin and self is only truly broken by a stronger affection.
[16:59] One affection is only ever removed from the place of primary existence in our heart, the depths of our heart, by a much stronger affection.

All of our actions and our habits in life are connected to our deepest desire in life. Bad habits are only replaced by more compelling joy in life.
Now I've updated the language a little bit for our context and not doing it in a Scottish accent in any way even though that is my heritage but in essence he wrote this, says, we only cease to be the slave of one appetite because another has brought it into subordination.
A youth may cease to idolise sensual pleasure but it's because the idol of wealth and career success has gotten the ascendancy.
There is not one personal transformation where the heart is not left without an object of desire. The heart's desire for one particular object may be conquered but the desire to have some object is unconquerable.
[18:27] There is no void in other words of desire in the heart and it controls everything in life. The only way to dispossess the heart of an old affection is by the expulsive power of a new one.

If we set our hearts on being the best athlete in any kind of particular discipline, it will bring self-control in some things but it will never bring self-control in all things.
If you find you are not the best, it will always be just out of reach and you will start to lose control of your emotions. you will start to blame other people.

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Relationships will suffer. If career success, then some things will be able to be self-controlled but not all things. If it's family harmony, you'll be able to control some things but not all things.
So, this brings us to the second point. What is the one thing that if we set our hearts on it will bring us self-control in all things.
[19:37] And we get that in verse 23. I do all this for the sake of the gospel that I may share in its blessings.

When Paul writes there, I do all this, he's looking back to what he's written in chapters 7 to 9 and actually looking forward as well into what he's about to write in the rest of 9 and into 10 which if you look at it all, the theme of self-control is the thing that floats through the whole thing and he does it all for God's glory.
All of it. And bear in mind that when he talks about a life of sacrificial service of all people and of God, this is the Paul who endured so much personal sacrifice.
He suffered so much in life. so much hardship. He consistently surrendered his personal freedom and at the same time, this is the Apostle Paul who virtually in every list that I've seen to this day is listed as one of the top 10 most influential people in the history of humanity to this day.
And Paul tells us that this life of self-control has one source. It is one desire of the heart for the sake of the gospel that I may share in its blessings.
[21:08] Now there's one desire, two aspects. The blessings of the gospel. The gospel, as I said last week, is fundamentally the absolute core foundational message of the Christian faith.

life-altering news that even though I am deeply sinful and evil and flawed and deserving of God's judgment because of my rejection of God, of our created God, the world who's made all things, I've rejected him by determining to live life my own way as myself as Lord and master of my own life, that if I put my trust in the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who died on a Roman cross in history, I am forgiven, I'm loved, I'm affirmed, and I'm at peace with God.
And God's love for me in Jesus Christ is as high as the heavens are above. In Jesus I am unconditionally, unchangeably, constantly, eternally, delighted in by God.
despite who I am, despite my falls and my failures. That's the message of Easter. So that's coming up in the next four weeks.
We're looking at the hope of the gospel. And what Paul says is if the main thing that I set my heart on is that good news, if that is the thing that's the driving centre of my life, if that is my joy and my hope, then self-control is possible in all things.
[22:59] Because in Jesus I am affirmed already despite my performance. I am loved and accepted already despite my performance.

I have the praise of the praise worthy. You see, the gospel is the only thing that I can set my heart on and never lose it. The radical security of the gospel means we don't have to secure it, don't have to maintain it, don't have to keep it.
It's guaranteed. Notice though that the gift of the gospel does not lead to passivity on Paul's behalf. See the rest of the sentence, that I may share in its blessings.
Now the word share there is a word that means partnership in the original New Testament language. Paul's passion is to share the benefits of the gospel to others.
The passion of his heart was for others to see the ultimate treasure that Jesus Christ and the gospel really are. and this meant for him that he wanted to make sure that there was nothing in his life that would cause others to miss the ultimate treasure that Jesus is.
[24:30] He didn't want anything to disqualify him from that prize, the prize of sharing the blessings of the gospel with others. that is, if you look at it, Paul's fundamental focus in life, his main desire was actually away from himself.

You see, when I train for a run, and I don't put myself in the athlete category at all, when I train for a run that I'm participating in, I exercise self-control in that part of my life so that I can achieve something for myself.
Normally a finish is medal, that's about it really, just finished. if I get there in time, they're all gone. Ironically, the one thing I'm doing as I'm training for that goal, for me historically, the one thing that I'm not able to control is how much I train myself.
I tend to always run myself into an injury. Paul rests secure in the good news of Jesus Christ as the deepest desire of his heart and from there it drives him out to exercise self-control in all areas of life that he might share it with others.

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You see, the gospel loudly proclaims that in Jesus everything that we need for life and salvation is already done.
[26:12] It's not something that we do. We receive God's approval, we don't achieve it. And yet Paul is not passive. Now, over this term, we've been looking at seven rhythms and these seven rhythms, what they're doing is constantly keeping the gospel in front of us.

And these seven rhythms push it down into our hearts to bring about the change of character and priorities that the gospel demands. These are rhythms that are done privately and corporately because we need the clarity and the accountability and the support of others on the journey to bring about that change.
All of these rhythms are both private and corporate. They are not things we do to win God's favour. We pursue them because we have God's favour in the gospel of Jesus.
And these rhythms take us deeper and deeper and deeper into the good news. Rhythms like these are in fact God's gracious gift to us.
Gracious gift to us for our endurance and growth into all the blessings of what we have in Jesus.
The key to endurance, the key to self-control is the gospel.
[27:36] and with self-control we see the gospel and experience the gospel more. But it's not easy.

And I asked the question a moment ago, what are you doing differently? What's changed in the last month? What are you doing differently? What steps have you taken?
Because the reality is it's not easy, it's a battle. Discipline and self-control are never easy. Many a time we will want to give up because we are weary or losing heart.
And if we are not pursuing these disciplines or disciplines like these, it's actually one of the key signs that you are in fact losing heart and weary.
We must never take our eyes therefore off the endurance of Jesus, the self-control of Jesus. And one of the best descriptions of this is Hebrews chapter 12 verses 1 to 3.
[28:46] Now these sentences, if you want to stick it up on the screen, these sentences highlight the self-control of Jesus Christ. Jesus knew everything that happened to him was going to happen to him.

He knew that he would be betrayed, he knew that he would be abandoned, he knew that he would be killed and yet he still did it. He did it so well in fact, it says there that he endured the cross and he scorned its shame.
So where did he get the self-control to endure the hardship and the self-control to regard the shame of the cross, dying on that cross for the sin of humanity regarding it as absolutely nothing?
Was it that he had a great willpower, more willpower than any other human being? no.
It's right there for the joy set before him, he endured the cross scorning its shame. You see the secret of self-control is setting heart on the right thing.
[30:16] Jesus did not have willpower, he had joy power. so what was it that Jesus set his heart on that gave him such joy that he endured such rejection as the cross, the shame of the cross?

What was the joy that was before Jesus? What did he set his heart on that led him to endure what he endured? to exercise the self-rule of allowing people that he created to nail him to a cross?
What was the passion of his heart that gave him such self-control? for? Now, a few times in the past as I've looked at this, let me make it brief.
It's the one thing, it's the one thing that an eternal, perfect, satisfied, loved, fulfilled, powerful God did not have before the cross.
And that's you. That's me. It's humanity. humanity. It's what drove you and I are the ones that drove him to the cross.
[31:41] And yet, the joy of what would be achieved in bringing us back to him, meant that he exercised self-control and allowed us to do it.

Rebellious, sinful, humanity created for him, but setting the passions of their heart on everything else but him. Jesus endured, self-disciplined because he loves us like that.
Grasping that truth more and more, looking to the cross more and more, will cause us to love him like that. The secret to a life of self-control is pursuing these rhythms of grace which constantly put the gospel in front of us, not, not willpower, joy.
It's joy in Jesus and the gospel. In the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ to fill our deepest longings and desires of our hearts, the gospel of Jesus Christ is the only expulsive power and the ultimate desire and affection of the heart that will drive out every other desire, the ones that your

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day-to-day practices and habits in life are currently demonstrating that you're pursuing and that I'm pursuing.
The rhythms of grace flow out of a gospel-renewed heart but they are also the agents, the means of heart renewal so that Jesus becomes our delight and joy as we are his.
[33:28] And so as we finish off this service today, we're just going to look to Jesus one last time as we participate in the Lord's Supper together. We're going to gaze on Jesus as we participate in this.

We're going to lift our hearts to him this morning as we eat and we drink with grateful hearts for the mercy of his love for us, mercy that saw him joyfully self-controlled as he endured the cross to win back rebellious creation, humanity back into relationship with himself and to give us an affirmation, a love, a security, a hope that will never be taken away.
Amen.

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