

Welcome to the first sermon of our New Year's "Control: Can's and Can'ts." Each sermon in this series will explore different aspects of control: our thoughts, actions, speech, goals, and responses to challenges.

I thought about this subject because as we start a new year, many of us probably reflect on our lives and set goals for the year ahead. However, one of the most critical questions we need to consider is how much of our life's path can we steer on our own, and where must we yield to God?

Today, we start the series with the subject of "Understanding Control: What's in Our Hands."

To explore this, let's turn to the wisdom of Proverbs 19:21, which captures the essence of our human plans versus God's ultimate purpose. It reminds us of the delicate balance between our efforts and God's sovereign will. Let's listen closely to these words and reflect on their meaning in our lives as we step into this new year, "The human mind may devise many plans, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will be established."

This verse speaks to the human tendency to plan and strategize our lives. It acknowledges our natural desire to control and direct our paths. However, it contrasts this with the ultimate sovereignty and will of God. It suggests that while we are free to make plans, the final outcome is aligned with God's divine purpose.

This means that the challenge we often face is not a lack of faith but rather a struggle to align our will with God's. We struggle because we don't want to lose control of what we think is best for us. We hold tight to our wants, and in doing so, we miss God's blessings.

Think of it this way: We believe in God's power and goodness, yet there are moments when our actions reflect a hesitancy to fully embrace his plan. This misalignment isn't born from disbelief but from our human inclination to cling to what we know and can manage. It is like standing at the edge of a vast ocean of God's promises, yet only allowing ourselves to dip our toes in, hesitant to dive into the depths of trust. In this space, between belief and complete surrender, is where we often find ourselves wrestling over control.

Can you see what our challenge is? It is not just about strengthening our faith; it is about letting that faith guide us to align our steps, our decisions, and our very lives with the will of God. For as Jesus himself exemplified in the garden of Gethsemane, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me, yet not what I want but what you want" (Matthew 26:39), true faith is demonstrated not in how much we know but in our willingness to align our will with God's and trust his love, even when it challenges our human desires for control. So, the most consequential thing is not whether we can control something or not but whether we trust God with it.

So, when we read, "The human mind may devise many plans, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will be established," it teaches us to hold our plans lightly and recognize that though our control is limited, our trust in God can be unlimited. This is not to discourage planning or effort but to encourage a humble acknowledgment to trust God's goodness and divine plan for our lives.

This same wisdom is found in the New Testament. For example, James 4:13-15: “Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money.” Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. Instead, you ought to say, “If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that.” This passage reinforces the idea of Proverbs 19:21, emphasizing the uncertainty of life and the need to submit our plans to God’s will.

Or what about Matthew 6:33-34, where Jesus said: “But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.” Jesus is teaching about trusting our life and future to God by focusing on seeking God’s kingdom and trusting in his provision. “Seeking God’s kingdom” means believing and living by his teachings, finding joy and purpose in being Christ-like.

What do all these Scriptures have in common besides making the point that we have very little control over life as a whole? They call us to trust in God, not by being inactive or indifferent to what is going on, but with an active, vibrant faith. This means doing our best, preparing diligently, and then, with a humble heart, surrendering the outcome to God’s will. This is not a sign of weakness but of immense strength, acknowledging that while we are co-authors of our story, the ultimate author is God himself. As Proverbs 16:9 reminds us, “The human mind plans the way, but the Lord directs the steps.”

But is this possible? A piece of cake, right? How do we do this? Are you familiar with the Serenity Prayer? “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference.” This prayer is a powerful tool in understanding control. It teaches us to embrace the serenity of accepting things beyond our control: the past, the actions of others, and the unforeseen events of life. At the same time, it encourages us to muster the courage to change what is within our power: our attitudes, our choices, and our responses to life’s challenges. And above all, it asks for wisdom to discern the line between the changeable and unchangeable—the can’s and can’t’s.

Both the Serenity Prayer and the Scriptures we have studied today teach us the importance of recognizing the limitations of our power to control what happens in our lives and around us. We can’t control people’s thoughts, feelings, or actions, and trying to do so only leads to frustration. We can’t control how others perceive us, how they act towards us, and situations that are, by nature, beyond our reach. We can’t control what happened in the past or what will happen in the future. Accepting this is not a defeat; it is a victory of understanding.

On the other side, there are many things we can control. We can control how we relate to those around us, our reactions and responses to challenges and the unexpected, and the words that come out of our mouths. We also can control the boundaries we set in unhealthy relationships or harmful environments and situations (we can choose to be there or not). We can control the goals we pursue in life and align them with God’s will (Jesus’ teachings). Ultimately, we control the person we become in this life, one that makes things better or worse.

The key to all of this is our daily decision to seek God's kingdom first, finding peace in God's righteousness rather than getting consumed and ultimately lost in the chaos of the world.

My friends, there is immense freedom and peace in accepting our limitations, what we can and can't control. This acceptance does not diminish our role or responsibility but aligns us with God's greater, more beautiful plan for each of us. In this surrender, we find true serenity, the kind mentioned in Philippians 4:7, "And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

As we move forward, I encourage each of you to reflect on areas in your life where you might be grasping for control but can't. Think about the situations, relationships, or decisions where you need to practice letting go and letting God. Start by identifying what's within your control and what isn't. Each day, try to identify moments where you can apply the Serenity Prayer, asking for serenity, courage, and wisdom. Address what you can control and surrender to God what you can't. Then, meditate on God's wisdom and promises and align your life with it. Resolve to act on faith, not on obsession, greed, power, or anything else that comes from a place of selfishness or fear. Finally, focus on trusting God. Remember, our journey in faith is not about having control over every aspect of our lives but about trusting in the one who has control over the universe.

This year (and always), let us embrace this journey of understanding control with open hearts. May we find the balance between our efforts and God's sovereignty, and in doing so, may we discover the peace and fulfillment that comes from living in harmony with God's perfect plan for us. Amen.