

PASTOR'S NOTES. CONTROL vs. RELATIONSHIP, Part 2

Jesus said to them, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to Me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in Me will never be thirsty. But I said to you that you have seen Me and yet do not believe. Everything that the Father gives Me will come to me, and anyone who comes to Me I will never drive away; for I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me. And this is the will of Him who sent Me: that I should lose nothing of all that He has given Me, but raise it up on the last day. This is indeed the will of My Father: that all who see the Son and believe in Him may have eternal life; and I will raise them up on the last day."

John 6:35-40

Imagine that you are sitting down to play a game of chess against a grandmaster. You have the option of 20 different moves to begin, and after he makes his move, you have as many or more options of moves after that. The grandmaster does not know what moves you are going to make (at least at first), but that is unimportant. It seems that whatever moves you make, he will be able to counter and will eventually win the game. He doesn't have to control everything in order to be confident of being victorious.

Sometimes we think of God being in control as if He predicts the future and already knows how we will act or even makes us act. But maybe the future doesn't work that way; maybe God doesn't need to *predict* anything. Maybe instead God simply responds to our good and bad decisions (as well as those of others) and continues to work them into His plan, as only He can.

We believe that God gives us the freedom of choice. Those of us who believe we have a relationship with God treasure that freedom. In my prayers with God, I never imagine that God will ever *make* me do anything. I am convinced that God gives us the freedom to choose because Love requires that freedom. He doesn't want anyone to live eternally with Him who doesn't want to be there. And it's not His fault that the alternative is destruction: a fiery hell, an outer darkness, the opposite of true Life. So I believe it also follows that the alternative has to be allowed to appear attractive; otherwise we would choose God out of fear and not because we want to be in His presence. If this sounds like it puts God into a real bind, I agree. God gives us this freedom to choose Him or reject Him, and He will not *force* us to do anything.

Consider the life of Jesus as we have it in the gospels. Can you see any place in the scripture where He *forces* anyone to do anything? I guess the closest examples might be when He clears the temple in Matthew 21:12-13, Mark 11:15-18, Luke 19:45-46, John 2:13-21 and when He curses the fig tree in Matthew 21:18-19, Mark 11:12-14, 20-24. But these might be a bit of a stretch: He would not have been able to get the money changers to leave by force; it is more likely that they willingly moved because they respected Him as a teacher and feared the crowd. And while He says in Mark 11:23 that

by faith you can move a mountain, He does not say that by faith we can force another human being. And, apart from these, there doesn't seem to be any time that Jesus forces anyone into doing what they don't want to do. He invites his disciples to follow Him; they have a choice. He doesn't go up to anyone to have them do anything for Him, except for going up to John the Baptist for baptism (Matthew 3:13-15) and asking the woman at the well for water (John 4:7). Even these encounters seem more like invitations than commands. Finally notice that the promises of Christ in John 6:35-40: that the will of God is for those who "come to Me."

"Come to Me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy, and My burden is light."

Matthew 11:28-30

But to leave things open to us like this or to appear so passive test our patience. Many of us have this image of Christ eventually returning and "straightening" out the world, especially *them*. Even now our prayers might be asking God to *make* some things happen, even if it means taking away the free choice of others. We can't have it both ways. We treasure that God will never force anything upon us. We can't have our freedom at the expense of someone else's, even if that would alleviate a lot of suffering in the world.

I imagine that it must be almost torture for God to see how we suffer, sometimes by our own willfulness, sometimes by someone else. Because of how He treasures our freedom, He can only intercede in subtle, almost invisible ways. So often He seems absent, or too passive, or powerless.

Except He's not. The grandmaster is still countering our moves, and still bringing creation along to victory. I could tell more about how He's taken my good works, along with my mistakes and my sin, and brought me to this wonderful day in your presence. But I'm out of newsletter space...

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the name 'Kevin', written in a cursive style.