

On God's Leash

Turn to James 4:13-16:

Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit"— 14 yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. 15 Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." 16 As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. (James 4:13-16, ESV)

- I've titled this message "On God's Leash." These words from James, the brother of Jesus, seem harsh at first, but they encourage an attitude that we believers ought to cultivate.
- This is what I'd like to discuss today, but before I do, allow me to share a bit of my own testimony...

My (Mark's) 50th anniversary as a Christian

- This past Friday, April 22, I celebrated my 50th anniversary as a Christian. Back in 1972 I was a hormone-driven, 15-year-old teenager who was interested in girls, flying, rock-and-roll music, and just having a good time with my family and friends.
- Was I a "bad boy" by contemporary standards? No. My wonderful parents, with the help of a tight-knit community, kept a close eye on me. But I know the sinful desires that lurked in my heart and drove much of my thinking.
- In Ephesians 2:1-3 the Apostle Paul says this about me, and you, and all of us prior to coming to Christ:

"You were dead in the trespasses and sins 2 in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— 3 among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind." (Ephesians 2: 1-3, ESV)

- I've shared my story before...about how I committed my life to Jesus during a special weekend evangelistic event at the Methodist church here in Millersport. I avoided most of the meetings that weekend because I didn't want to be put under pressure to commit my life to Christ.
- I was running from God, but He was working in my heart. On the night of Saturday, April 22, 1972, I skipped the events at church, presumably to stay home and help Dad with a building project.
- During that evening, the conviction was so heavy on my heart that, before going to bed, I knelt and turned over my life to the lordship of Christ.
- The next day, Sunday, I did attend the events at church, and God's Holy Spirit completely grabbed ahold of me and filled me in such a glorious way that I became His willing, joyful prisoner. I'm His forever because He deemed it so!
- Remember, I was dead in my trespasses and sins! I couldn't choose, on my own, to become a Christian. He made me alive in Christ – it's by His grace that I was saved.

Going forward

- As much as I love to tell that story, what I really would like to focus on is the dynamics of God's leading me from that point until now.
- If you would have asked me on April 22, 1972, how my life would unfold from there, I would have talked about my plans to go to Ohio State University where I would major in medicine with the goal of taking over my father's laboratory business.
- At the time I had never heard of a girl named Donna Waibel. It never crossed my mind that I'd go into education and, instead of becoming a medical professional, I'd have a career in education that spanned working with students in grades 1 through the doctorate level.
- In the middle of those all pursuits I'd live in Newark, Ohio, Lexington, Kentucky, and Lancaster, Ohio before moving back to Millersport and growing a family. None of these particulars were on my "radar" back in 1972.
- Proverbs 16:1 says: ***"The plans of the heart belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the Lord."*** In the same chapter, verse 9 it says, ***"The heart of man plans his way, but the Lord establishes his steps."***
- Those verses contain two "buts," and they are very big "buts!" We humans may make our plans, ***but*** the Lord has the final say.
- How does this work? Do we really have any "say so" in our lives? Regarding our salvation, I think all believers are absolutely thrilled, humbled, and yet grateful that, while we were dead, when we were unable to save ourselves, God stepped in and made us alive in Him. It was 100% his doing.
- But Paul, in Philippians 2:12 and 13 admonishes us to (and I'm quoting) ***"work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, 13 for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure."***
- And remember the admonition we read from James a few minutes ago where he said that making plans on our own reveals a presumptuous attitude of arrogance and boasting.
- We are told to work out our own salvation...but it's really God who is working., right?
- So, what's God's part and what's our part in this whole business of living our lives?
- I think I have a helpful illustration, an analogy, that might bring some clarity to this mystery. Let me tell you about our dog...

Life on a leash

- One of the greatest joys in the life of our little dog, Lippy, is when we go for a walk.
- If Donna or I even whisper the words "walk" or "leash" in her hearing, Lippy bursts into spastic fits that are truly a sight to behold.
- She spins in circles and makes high-pitched yipping noises that increase in frequency and intensity until we outfit her with her walking apparel.
- Normally, she is "fenced in" our yard with an electrified underground wire that activates warning beeps then light corrective shocks if she attempts to cross the boundaries.
- Lippy does know, however, when she's wearing her walking collar connected to the leash and that, after we remove her electric collar, it is safe to leave the yard under our guidance.
- Without carrying the analogy too far, the picture of a dog on a leash is somewhat representative of the way God leads us in our lives.

A theological note...

- Before I go on, I want to acknowledge the theological tension between the views of “free will” Armenians and “predestination” Calvinists while exploring the choices we make in life under God’s loving and watchful eye.
- People of the Armenian persuasion believe that humans have a perfectly free will to accept or reject Christ. It’s up to them, and God, in essence, is waiting to see what they will choose.
- Calvinists, on the other hand, believe God decided our eternal fate prior to the foundation of the world. They believe that God is totally sovereign, and this includes our decision to come to Christ.
- These two theological “camps” were named after the men who promoted their respective views
- Both Calvinists and Armenians aggressively defend their viewpoints using scripture.
- It is, perhaps, the most animated, ongoing debate in all Christendom. Do we choose on our own to be saved, or did God choose who would be saved in eternity past?
- And after salvation, what is God’s role and what is ours?
- My leanings are toward the sovereignty of God...His will trumps everything! God does whatever He wants, whenever He wants, how He wants, and with whomever He wants.
- The pagan Babylonian king, Nebuchadnezzar, the most powerful man on the earth back in 600 BC, made a noteworthy and accurate proclamation after a time in which God humbled him by driving him mad for 7 years. During this time, he lived like a wild animal out in the wilderness.
- When Nebuchadnezzar came to his senses, he humbly admitted this about the Almighty God:

...all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing, and he does according to his will among the host of heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth; and none can stay his hand or say to him: “What have you done?” (Daniel 4:35, ESV)
- In full acknowledgement of God’s absolute sovereignty, it is still undeniable that we are creatures who do have a will, and we make choices that sometimes please our Maker and, at other times, result in chastisement distributed from the hand of our loving Father in heaven.
- **Ok...back to exploring the neighborhood with Lippy.** As we set off, I have in mind where I want to go and how fast I want to walk. I allow her a certain length of the leash, and she typically pulls forward until she feels its tug on her neck.
- Depending on the length I allow, she explores the terrain, sniffing here, tinkling there, all the while thinking she has amazing liberty as we move forward.
- Often, Lippy wants to stop and linger as she takes in a particularly intriguing smell. I may allow her all the time she wants, or I may give the leash a tug urging her forward.
- Lippy is enjoying our walk, but my will reigns supreme.
- Frequently, an unleashed dog has rushed up toward us, barking or just acting somewhat like a threat. I’ll pick up Lippy, holding her in my arms until the dog moves on or until its owner pulls it away.
- More than any other living thing, though, cats cause Lippy a high degree of irritation when they cross our path. If I permitted Lippy to go her own way, she would chase all cats as far as her dog limitations would allow.

- I usually override her will and pull her along as she is growling and barking at these innocent-looking creatures. But, just to teach her a lesson, at times I have allowed Lippy (while still on the leash) to run right up to a cat so that the cat will issue a threatening hiss or take a clawed swipe at her nose.
- My theory is Lippy will learn that her anger at cats is not worth all the pain and trouble and, in future excursions, she will ignore them as she recalls the discomfort and embarrassment caused by those sharp claws. So far Lippy has been a slow learner.
- Out of my great love for Lippy, I won't just turn her loose. At her current level of maturity, she would get into too much trouble, putting her life at risk.
- As another source of potential discomfort, we use a special collar with metal "fingers" that tighten around Lippy's neck when she pulls. The harder she resists the leash the more "chastisement" it causes.
- My daughter-in-law thinks the collar is cruel. But, prior to us using this collar, Lippy lived at the end of the leash, pulling so hard that it was difficult for her to breathe.
- I, as her master, believe she is more comfortable when she doesn't insist on her will as much and just remains content to let me do the leading. This collar distributes loving and continual "rebuke" when Lippy exercises her will more than I prefer.

God's leading

- Are you getting the picture? I think God leads us in similar ways.
- He has the overriding plan and will regarding our lives, but He allows us to make choices at the end of His leash. We feel like we have a lot of liberty, and we enjoy the experiences we have as we walk through life with Him.
- His love controls us (to quote from **2 Corinthians 5:14**; other versions use the words "constrains us" or "guides us") not allowing us to experience any testing beyond what we can handle through His grace.
- There are times when He picks us up in His arms to protect us from situations that could threaten our lives.
- He may allow pain, often because of our own bad choices, so we can learn from the pain and be more fruitful in the end.
- Have you ever wondered what it means, in the Lord's Prayer, when we say "Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil"? Perhaps this "dog walking" illustration helps.
- When I decide to allow Lippy to agitate a cat, I've led her into temptation. After getting her nose pummeled by those sharp claws, she probably wishes I would have pulled her away.
- Can you think of situations in your life where you gave into temptation, and you regretted it later? Did you wish that God would have led you away from the temptation long before it became an issue?
- I realize the analogy of a dog on a leash is not perfect but, with some prayerful reflection, it may offer a general picture of how God's will and our will interact.
- Listen again to Paul's encouragement to the Philippians:

Therefore, my beloved...work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure. (Philippians 2:12-13, ESV)

- Lippy is doing the walking. She is “working out” her walk and making dozens of choices the entire time. But I am “willing and working” for my good pleasure as we go.
- As I reflect on my own walk with the Lord these past 50 years, I can see so many times when, in my immaturity, I pulled too hard on the leash. God’s fingers would tighten around my neck. At other times God would allow angry “temptation” cats to scratch my nose with their claws.
- Through good times and bad, I’ve learned that abiding within His will as defined in His word is wise, because it achieves His good pleasure.
- And I’ve learned that it’s wise, as Jesus’ brother James warns us, to cultivate a humble attitude that acknowledges “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that.”

The Lord is my Shepherd

- To summarize and close, I’d like to read what is, perhaps, the most beloved passage in the Bible, Psalm 23. This is from the New King James version. If you’d like to follow along in whatever version you have with you today, feel free. Or just listen and reflect.
- As I read, consider what we discussed today about how our Lord lovingly leads us through our Christian lives:

***The Lord is my shepherd;
I shall not want.
He makes me to lie down in green pastures;
He leads me beside the still waters.
He restores my soul;
He leads me in the paths of righteousness
For His name’s sake.***

***Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil;
For You are with me;
Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.***

***You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;
You anoint my head with oil;
My cup runs over.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
All the days of my life;
And I will dwell in the house of the Lord
Forever. (Psalm 23, NKJV)***

Close in prayer...