Sunday, October 28, 1990
ENDANGERED CHARACTER QUALITIES (No. 3 in a Series: Discipline)
Genesis 25:27-34; Galatians 5:16-23

There are a number of “endangered character qualities” within our human community and even within some of us who claim to be Christian. Some of the most endangered in today’s world are “integrity,” the subject of the first sermon in this series; “courage,” the theme of the second sermon in this series; and “discipline,” the topic of this sermon. Future sermons in this series will be about “commitment,” “vision,” and “gratitude.”

Many of us, when we hear the word “discipline,” tend to think of it as something imposed upon us from some authority outside of ourselves or as something we do to others. Thus, we talk of parents who “discipline” their children.

Discipline also means to commit oneself to follow a certain way of doing things or to make a commitment to a way of life. It comes from the word “disciple.” It is this use of the word “discipline” that I am talking about. To focus the theme further, the character quality of discipline that is most endangered today is in the form of “self-discipline” or “self-control.”

There are some people in this church whom I admire very much because of what they have been able to do with their God-given abilities. They are what I would define as being successful not because of the amount of money they make or have made, but because they are fulfilling their potential. They have a sense of direction and purpose in their lives. They are happy in the best sense of that word. They have self-esteem that comes from the knowledge that they are worthwhile because they are created by God, and God does not make any junk.

For years now, I have been observing and studying such people in this congregation and in other places as well. And what I have noticed above all else is that all of these individuals possess the character quality of “discipline.” It is not an endangered trait for them.

And then I’ve known other people who’ve had a successive string of setbacks and failures in the distant or recent past and who do not have a sense of direction and purpose in their lives. If you asked them what happened, they would probably offer you a very candid appraisal as to why some of these calamities have come their way. They would say such things as “I started to let things slide. I got careless. I stopped doing my homework one day. I started missing classes. I didn’t get to work on time. I didn’t follow up on the project. I didn’t keep my eye on the store. I became complacent. I stopped making my calls. I didn’t take care of myself. I thought problems would solve themselves.” These phrases describe a “lack of discipline.” Discipline is one of the most important character qualities a person can possess. It plays a key role in every area of a person’s life.

Some people lack discipline in their lives because they do not understand what discipline is. Or they may know what discipline is but do not know how to develop discipline — what steps to take. In this sermon, we are going to look first at what discipline is, second at how to develop and practice it, and third at what the rewards of discipline are.

What is discipline? The essence of discipline or the foundation of discipline can be found in two words—"delayed gratification.” One psychologist defined “delayed gratification” this way: “Delaying gratification is a process of scheduling the pain and pleasure of life in such a way as to enhance the pleasure by meeting and experiencing the pain first and getting it over with.”

Some children know how to do this instinctively. I watched a child eat a piece of cake recently. She carefully ate all around the piece so as to save the frosting to eat last. She was practicing delayed gratification.

Or watch how mature students handle their homework. They know that if they are to enjoy dinner and after-dinner activities, it's more difficult to do so with homework hanging over their heads, so disciplined students know that it's best to start and finish their homework after school or as soon as possible and get it done with. Then they can go out and enjoy the rest of the evening.

There's a story in the Old Testament of the Bible about a set of twins named Jacob and Esau that will help us understand the importance of discipline in the form of delayed gratification.

Although Esau and Jacob were twins, they were different in a number of ways. Esau was a skillful hunter, a man of the outdoors. He enjoyed all kinds of physical activity. Jacob, on the other hand, was smaller in stature and liked to stay around the house. His mother taught him to be a good cook. Thus it was that Jacob became his mother's favorite, and Esau his father's favorite. That in itself can cause a lot of problems.

As Isaac, the father, grew older, he came to lean more and more on Esau. When Isaac was old and blind, the rough Esau was gentle with him and quick to respond to whatever his dad wanted.

The point is that Esau, the first-born of the twins, had many good qualities. He was warm-hearted, forgiving, and loving. Even after his brother Jacob had defrauded him, when his temper cooled, Esau was forgiving.

What then was the matter with Esau? Why did he not play a larger role in Israel's history? Today and through the years, Christians and Jews often speak of Abraham and Sarah, of Isaac and Rebecca, and of Jacob, but Esau's name is not mentioned or remembered. With all of his good qualities, what was his major weakness?

Esau lacked the character quality of discipline. He lived according to his appetites. He gave in to his feelings of the moment. He knew nothing about "delayed gratification."

By virtue of being the first-born son, Esau was heir to the birthright. Upon his father's death, he would be the head of the household, the family's chief representative. But the benefits of the birthright seemed a long way off.

One day, when Esau returned from a hunting trip, he was worn out and hungry. As he got near the house, he smelled the food that Jacob was cooking. At that moment, with his stomach craving food, the birthright seemed unimportant in comparison with the hot meal that Jacob offered. Jacob, knowing his brother's lack of discipline, said he would trade him some food for his brother's birthright, and so the deal was made. As the Bible says, "Esau sold his birthright for a bowl of pottage." He could not wait for another hour or even another 10 minutes to satisfy his physical hunger. He gave in to the whim of the moment. He did not care enough for life's future possibilities to pay the price of delayed gratification. He lacked self-discipline.

A major problem with discipline in our time is that our culture is continually working to convince us that we need and deserve everything right now. We are constantly being told that to delay

any kind of gratification is wrong and unnecessary. We are told to “buy it now!” So what if you can’t afford the cost — borrow the money.

I see more people in financial trouble because they are not able to delay gratification. Whatever they see, whatever they desire, it must be had now! Very few people practice regular saving until they have enough money to purchase a wanted item and thus pay cash. Yet if you delay the gratification, think how much more you will enjoy it.

What is discipline? It is delayed gratification. It is self-control. It is keeping on top of the rambunctious passions inside of us. It means not quickly giving in to every desire or whim.

The kind of discipline we are talking about is a lot like conducting an orchestra. There are some powerful players inside each of us — passions, desires, angers, sex drives, memories of the past that haunt us, fear of the future, and many more. Your job and mine is to let each play their part. But if you let any one of them take charge, you no longer have an orchestra, but rather an uncontrolled bunch of soloists on a binge.

However, being the conductor leading an orchestra is about playing beautiful music. It is about harmony. “Those who have no rule over their own spirits are like cities broken into,” says the book of Proverbs in the Old Testament.

The Bible teaches us that self-control is the backbone of the good life. No wonder when St. Paul wrote about the fruit of the Spirit in his letter to the church at Galatia, he included self-control as being central. Listen to what he said: “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.”

Do you remember when you learned to drive an automobile? In order to drive safely, you need to learn to use the brakes and steering wheel as well as the gas pedal. The gas pedal is easy enough to manipulate. The brakes and steering wheel are something else again. Have you noticed that some people seem only to know how to use the gas pedal?

How then do we begin to develop and practice discipline? Here are some guidelines that come directly out of our Christian faith and understanding.

First, attempt always to be honest with yourself. Do not let your appetites and desires lead you. They will often mislead you. Ask yourself, “Is this something I truly need, or is it something I only want or desire? Can it be put off for a while? Do I really need to do it now?” If we did everything we felt like on the spur of the moment, this world would be in utter chaos.
Desire is not all bad by any means. It can be a friendly and helpful force in our lives. But desire is always waiting and ready to make a takeover bid. Desire can be good in that it makes us itch for what we’ve never had enough of, hunger for something better than we have ever tasted, thirst for living waters we’ve never drunk. A person with no desire plots the same route every day. Who wants to be a sparkless plug? Lose desire, and we lose the fun of living. But out of control, desire is trouble. Desire can even lead to addiction.

Second, make a commitment to follow a certain pattern or schedule beginning now and into the future, and then hold on to the commitment you have made in spite of your changing moods. It’s called “advance decision-making.” For example, if you are a student, make an advance decision to do your studying before you go partying, then keep to that commitment. Or suppose my wife and I decide that there’s something we truly want or need. Then we make the advance decision to save a certain amount of money each pay period until we have

enough, and only then do we purchase the item. The next step is — as soon as we get our paychecks, we have to take this money out first and put it aside. Take it off the top before we can spend it on something else.

When we talk about the need for each one of us to become generous givers, it is important to remember that regular giving is a discipline and that a pledge to the church for 1991 is advance decision-making. Make a decision now about what you are going to give cheerfully and regularly to the church for 1991, and then follow through with that decision. Then set aside that amount for the church each week or each pay period before you spend it on anything else. That's discipline.

Third, since discipline is about gaining control over our lives, remember that one sure way to lose control is to deliver our lives over to other people's approval. For some of us, life becomes a mad scramble to win the approval of someone else. It always fails.
One reason it fails is that we never get enough approval to satisfy us; every pat on the back leaves us needing more the next time. The chase becomes very depressing. Hot pursuit of approval leads us finally into despair and depression. It is a loss of control.

The answer is to let go of seeking approval. And the good news is that we never need to seek God's approval. It is always there, ready and waiting. God says to us continually—"You never need to earn anyone's approval, especially mine. All you have to do is to open yourself to accept God's approval."

The other good news of the Christian faith is that we do not have to handle our problems and temptations alone. We have a helper in our living. God's power comes to us in several ways. God works through our friends, those with whom we can talk things over and get our reasoning straightened out again and again. God works through the power of prayer and worship. If you follow a regular discipline of prayer and worship, you will find that your life takes on new joy and power. You see, God works through discipline. That's one of its rewards. I encourage you to make the advance decision to be present in worship here every Sunday and to follow a daily pattern of prayer in your life.

The rewards of the kind of discipline I have been talking about are built in. Practice this kind of discipline, and your life will have a new direction, power, and joy. Amen.