

LENT 2  
ZION EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH  
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**GOD ON TRIAL**  
**#2 – Showing Restraint**

In society today, like many other virtues, the virtue of self-restraint is often considered to be outdated or, even worse, a weakness. We're bombarded with messages that praise assertiveness, quick comebacks, and immediate gratification of one's desire to get even. The month's long Covid-19 ordeal really brought this out. I can't tell you how many public arguments and fights I heard as people, on edge by fear instilled in them by those in government bureaucracies, were quick to let others know that they didn't appreciate the way they wore their masks or didn't keep a specific distance from them.

In moments of adversity and provocation especially, self-restraint requires a sense of compassion and sympathy for what others are going through.

Last week, we began a series for Lent entitled "God on Trial." The point of this series is for us to examine some of the ways we tend to usurp the position of God as the Judge of all, elevating ourselves to being the judge of others and even His judge. This, of course, is foolishness on our part, but it's worse than that. It's actually a deep spiritual depravity at work within us that keeps us enslaved to our own sinful appetites and desires, rather than enjoying peace with God through Christ, our Savior.

In today's installment, we'll see how Jesus, through His teachings and His behavior, demonstrates the wisdom and power of restraint, and through it He offers us what we need from God, which is compassion and grace.

The account of Jesus' betrayal in the Garden of Gethsemane serves as a sharp contrast from what we witness in the world and even in our own hearts and reactions. We read of that event in Matthew 26:47-56:

*(ESV) While he was still speaking, Judas came, one of the twelve, and with him a great crowd with swords and clubs, from the chief priests and the elders of the people. (48) Now the betrayer had given them a sign, saying, "The one I will kiss is the man; seize him." (49) And he came up to Jesus at once and said, "Greetings, Rabbi!" And he kissed him. (50) Jesus said to him, "Friend, do what you came to do." Then they came up and laid hands on Jesus and seized him. (51) And behold, one of those who were with Jesus stretched out his hand and drew his sword and struck the servant of the high priest and cut off his ear. (52) Then Jesus said to him, "Put your sword back into its place. For all who take the sword will perish by the sword. (53) Do you think that I cannot appeal to my Father, and he will at once send me more than twelve legions of angels? (54) But how then should the Scriptures be fulfilled, that it must be so?" (55) At that hour Jesus said to the crowds, "Have you come out as against a robber, with swords and clubs to capture me? Day after day I sat in the temple teaching, and you did not seize me. (56) But all this has*

*taken place that the Scriptures of the prophets might be fulfilled." Then all the disciples left him and fled.*

When Jesus first invited His disciples to abandon their occupations and to become His students, He promised them – at least those who were fishermen – that they would from that point on be fishers of men. He had just performed a significant miracle called the great catch of fish, which seemed to them to mean that things were going to go pretty well for them. I mean, how could it be otherwise with Jesus and His special powers on their side.

For a while, that's precisely how things went, too. However, over the course of the next three years, things slowly but surely intensified. Jesus met opposition from the religious leaders of the day - those known as the lawyers, scribes, Pharisees, and Sadducees. Of course, Jesus always came out on top in every intense situation. So, again, from the disciples' perspective, it must have seemed that things were mostly going to go their way.

But then, Jesus started preparing His disciples for what would inevitably happen – how He would be betrayed by one of them, arrested by his fellow countrymen, turned over to their hated enemies, the Romans, and ultimately found innocent but put to death despite that verdict. In fact, on the very night before it all happened, Jesus' final lesson with the disciples on Maundy Thursday emphasized to them all the more how hard things were about to get – for Himself and for them, too. He quoted

to them this prophecy from Zechariah: *I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.*

And it didn't take long for these disciples to get their first taste, because as soon as they finished the Passover meal and celebrated the first Lord's Supper, they went to a place called the Garden of Gethsemane. It was there that Judas, one of Jesus' beloved twelve disciples, brought a mob of people to arrest Jesus.

In this moment of confrontation and crisis, Peter, who tended to think of himself as the leader of Jesus' disciples, drew his sword and cut off the ear of the high priest's servant. This was just like Peter. He was bold, but also brash. Peter seldom showed restraint in life. For him it was more leap first, ask questions later. So, without any regard for this fellow who was in that mob, he whips his sword from its sheath, and, before you know it, there's blood in the streets. If it weren't so serious it would have been somewhat comical, because in his undisciplined and untrained swordplay, he only manages to get the man's ear, hardly enough to send this mob scrambling.

By contrast to Peter's impulsive manner of dealing with the situation, Jesus demonstrated restraint. He rebuked Peter and told him to control himself and his sword – to put it away before he gets someone, maybe even himself, killed. Then, with perfect self-control and perfect compassion, Jesus stoops down, picks up the man's ear, reattaches it and heals it instantly.

This act of restraint on Jesus' part stands in stark contrast to everyone else involved in that evening's riotous events: Judas, the mob, Peter, the Sanhedrin, Pilate, Herod, the soldiers. Jesus walked the path opposite of the world's notion of retribution. Jesus' actions demonstrated that true justice is found in forgiveness and grace, not in retaliation or violence.

Here in the Garden of Gethsemane was just the beginning of the ways and occasions Jesus demonstrated such restraint. He did not retaliate against one religious leader who slapped Him in the face. He didn't lash out at those accusers who were telling lies about Him. He didn't use His divine power, or even so much as raise a mortal fist, against those who struck Him, spit at Him, or beat Him. Then, when soldiers were pounding nails into His hands and feet to fasten Him to a cross, Jesus showed beautiful restraint most sublime. In the midst of that gruesome and torturous act, He prayed. And what did He pray? Not, "Father, stop them or make them suffer for what they are doing to Me," but rather "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). This act of forgiveness amidst suffering reflects the very heart of Jesus and the central message of the Bible and of the Christian faith. Jesus was all about restraint, which means that He was all about compassion, all about forgiveness, all about love for everyone and for all.

As followers of Jesus, Christians are called to live in that same restraint that Jesus displayed. In a world marked by division, hostility, and quick judgment – not to

mention rash and vengeful reactions – we are called to be agents of forgiveness, of grace, and of kindness. By embodying restraint and proclaiming Christ’s restraint, we bear witness to the message of the gospel of Christ and offer hope to a world in need.

Part of the problem is that we tend to think of restraint and the self-discipline it requires as weakness. I mean, we’re not about to let anyone take advantage of us or to publicly humiliate us, right? So, a cross word from someone in the grocery store check out line, a tap on the breaks in traffic followed by a hand gesture, a bit of gossip spoken about us by a coworker – every misdeed, act of aggression, or unkind word – gives us an opportunity to show everyone just how powerful our inner rage can be, and how vengeful.

The reality is that restraint is not actually a sign of weakness but of inner strength. It is the strength of love and selflessness to respond, not as we might initially react in the heat of the moment, but with purposeful love and forgiveness in the face of betrayal, injustice, and adversity. The Bible teaches this very love and forgiveness when it says, “Be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you.”

Think of it this way: if you hit your thumb with a hammer, is it your first reaction to allow your left hand to yank the hammer away from the right hand and then to start swinging away to make sure the right hand never does that again? That would be foolish, wouldn’t it? Nothing

good can come from that approach. The left hand allows the hurt, forgives the right hand, and the two go on as companions to do the good work in which they were engaged, which is building.

See, Jesus' restraint wasn't just in the direction of His disciples, fellow Jews, Roman governor and soldiers. His restraint was also directed toward you and me. The Bible makes it perfectly plain that the reason Jesus allowed Himself to be nailed to that cross was in order to bear the burden of our sin. In the Old Testament book of Isaiah, we read these words: *Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.*

We needed and still do need this Jesus to be our Savior. We need His quiet and purposeful obedience to his Father's will. We need His perfection, His holiness, and His righteousness to be able to stand before our Father. We need His restraint in the face of our brash, selfish reactions.

But you, know, others need this Jesus, too. You and I often find ourselves in the position of being able to introduce them to Jesus in the way we react to the accusations and hurts they cast our direction. When you are wronged, remember that when you show restraint toward others as Jesus has shown restraint toward you, you operate from a position of strength. God has

forgiven you and declared you righteous in His sight. You don't have to prove anything. You don't have to be the judge, jury, and executioner. If you are a believer in Jesus, His Spirit fills you. You can be a light in this world where darkness reigns. Instead of fighting back, you can swing a different sword – the one the Bible refers to as the sword of the Spirit—the gospel of Jesus. And maybe through your strange behavior and the message behind it, others will come to know Jesus' love and restraint.

The Son of God was willing to suffer all kinds of wrong from the hands and mouths of sinners. He even allowed them to put Him on trial and to execute Him. He allowed this because He knew the outcome would be salvation for sinners. So, throughout the trial He showed remarkable restraint, godly restraint, humble restraint – with a significant dose of love and forgiveness. AMEN!