



"The things you read will fashion you by slowly conditioning your mind."
—A.W. Tozer

28-Dec-12

Controlling the Gap (Part One)

It is there for but a moment, a mere fraction of a second of time, and then it is gone, never to be seen again. It is how the training of our true character is tested, sometimes under the most severe circumstances. In fact, our very futures in God's Kingdom can be said to rest on this moment of truth. Yet each day, we experience hundreds, if not thousands, of these events.

This event is the gap between stimulus and response.

It lasts for only an instant, but our response can last a lifetime. In addition, we only get one shot at it, so we must get it right the first time. Controlling the gap between stimulus and response is a fundamental responsibility of true Christians. We need to recognize its existence and learn to utilize this momentary space in time properly.

During each gap, each moment of truth, we must maintain awareness and control to react in a godly manner. We will examine how we can be prepared—not caught off guard—and thereby respond accordingly during these everyday tests of [faith](#).

A stimulus is an agent, action, or condition that causes a corresponding activity or response to occur. A response is our action that occurs as a result of the stimulus or stimuli. Our responses, which can take a variety of forms (verbal, written, facial, physical, and so forth), can be *unconditioned* (natural) or *conditioned* (unnatural or learned).

An "unconditioned response" occurs when stimulus and response are naturally connected. It is a natural sequence of events, an unconscious, uncontrolled, and unlearned relationship. A simple example is that if a person tries to touch his eye, his eyelid will automatically close in self-defense. Likewise, human nature has built within it hundreds of unconditional responses to various stimuli. Pride, self-preservation, and stubbornness are all common characteristics of human nature that result in unconditional—and often unfavorable—responses.

A "conditioned response," then, is the opposite. Conditioned responses to stimuli are indeed unnatural and learned through association. Most of you have heard of the early experiments of Ivan

Pavlov. He noticed that a dog, when presented with food, would naturally salivate. This is an unconditional or natural response. He then rang a bell each time that he presented the dog with food. Over time, he stopped presenting food, and the conditioned response (the learned behavior) was that as soon as the bell was rung, the dog salivated. Pavlov concluded that animals and people can be taught or conditioned to associate an unnatural response to a particular stimulus.

We had a modern-day example of this in our own home. Our dog, Gadget, was a 75-pound living rug, and we sometimes had to poke him to make sure he was still alive. Yet, he would instantly spring up at the sound of his metal food dish hitting the counter. It was as if all of the energy he had stored up by sleeping the day away exploded into a frantic attempt to get to his food and gobble it down as quickly possible. He made it look and sound as if he had not eaten in days. So what happens when we used a metal mixing bowl in the kitchen? Indeed, Gadget came running, expecting dinner—much to his disappointment.

We may think that we are smarter than the average bear, but like it or not, from the time we were born, we have been conditioned on a daily basis. Our parents, relatives, friends, co-workers, television, and other media have all conditioned us—and continue to do so—in good and bad ways. Our choices about the cars we drive, the clothes we wear, and the food we eat have all been influenced through conditioning. Advertisers—the masters of conditioning—associate their products with attractive models who often wearing seductive clothing. They realize that good-looking people naturally elicit a favorable feeling, and their goal is to associate their product with this feeling. They pair their product with an attractive, desirable individual or situation to evoke a pleasant response. By using peer-pressure and our own emotions against us, they exert a powerful and manipulative source of conditioning, making us feel as if we cannot possibly live without their products. Even the music, often in the form of catchy jingles, is carefully chosen to reinforce a pleasant feeling associated with their products.

Here is the hard part for Christians: Advertising is actually one of the more visible and most easily avoided and resisted conditioning influences in our world. The [god](#) of this world ([II Corinthians 4:4](#)) knows that humans respond readily to conditioning, and unfortunately, our society—Satan's world—frequently rewards sinful behavior with positive reinforcement. [The world](#) is full of constant conditioning, and our characters and our behaviors are affected as a result.

As Christians, though, we are called to remove ourselves spiritually from the world ([Revelation 18:4](#); [John 17:14-17](#)) that we live within physically. It is our duty to remove the negative conditioning, the negative influences, that are controllable. We have the power to choose to avoid and/or resist some, though not all, of our negative conditioning. Unfortunately, some of it stays with us to the end of our days, and that is where we really need God's help and grace.

Conditioning is by no means a new phenomena; it has been part of Satan's weaponry since the creation of man. God warned the Israelites not to be influenced or conditioned to adopt the practices of those around them. Notice [Leviticus 18:1-5](#):

Then the LORD spoke to [Moses](#), saying, "Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: 'I am the LORD your God. According to the doings of the land of Egypt, where you dwelt, you shall not do; and according to the doings of the land of Canaan, where I am bringing you, you shall not do; nor shall you walk in their ordinances. You shall observe My

judgments and keep My ordinances, to walk in them: I am the LORD your God. You shall therefore keep My statutes and My judgments, which if a man does, he shall live by them: I am the LORD."

God knew Satan's conditioning tactics and how easily we are affected. He reemphasizes this warning throughout the Old Testament, as well as in the New Testament. In [James 1:27](#), for example, James cautions, "[K]eep oneself unspotted from the world." God's message is very consistent throughout His Word: Avoid and resist the pulls of this world ([I John 2:15-17](#)).

In Part Two, we will learn that not all conditioning is evil and that we can use the good, positive kind to help us to grow in godly character.

- Bill Onisick

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