



"Perfect valour is to behave, without witnesses, as one would act were all the world watching."

—Francois de la Rochefoucauld

04-Jan-13

Controlling the Gap (Part Two)

In Part One, we saw that true Christians must learn to control the momentary gap between stimulus and response. We need to recognize its existence and learn to utilize this time properly. However, we have been conditioned by life's experiences to respond in certain ways—and by rewarding sinful behavior, [Satan](#) himself has trained a blinded world, subject to human nature, to reject [God](#) and His ways as a matter of course (see [Romans 8:7](#)).

However, conditioning is not necessarily a bad thing. Changes in behavior are the result of our response to events (stimuli) that produce a consequence, which can be either good or bad. The consequence serves to reinforce that response. It could be verbal praise or a feeling of accomplishment or satisfaction for doing the right thing. Alternatively, it could also be the emptiness and feeling of separation from God as the result of [sin](#).

We realize that life here on earth is a training ground. With each stimulus, we have an opportunity, albeit often brief, to think about our purpose and apply God's standards and an element of self-control before responding. These moments are our everyday trials that God uses to build our characters.

How, though, do we prepare for these trials? How do we overcome Satan's persistent and pervasive conditioning? We must offset Satan and his world's evil conditioning with godly, spiritual conditioning. Spiritual conditioning involves prayer, study, meditation on God, and occasional fasting. Spiritual conditioning prepares us by refining our judgment of—and hence our response to—trying situations. Spiritual conditioning reminds us of the eternal consequences of our actions, restoring our fear of God.

We are not alone in our battle with Satan's conditioning. God has provided us the tools we need, especially His Spirit. Realizing how difficult it is to live in such a world, God established the [Sabbath](#), an entire day of the week dedicated to spiritual conditioning. Moreover, God established His holy days—annual days and weeks dedicated to focused, spiritual conditioning.

We have all heard that if we are not moving forward, we are falling behind. This statement is true because the state of "no conditioning" does not exist. As long as we are living, we are experiencing various degrees of positive and negative conditioning. Therefore, if we are not diligently working to create and instill positive conditioning in our lives, we are by default being negatively conditioned by Satan and his world. Likewise, if our positive conditioning does not at least outweigh the constant, unavoidable negative conditioning, we are inevitably sliding backwards.

The deck seems stacked against us. Each day, we experience hundreds, if not thousands, of stimuli. We must overcome unconditioned responses, our human nature. We must avoid where possible, the negative conditioning of [the world](#) ([II Corinthians 7:1](#)). And understanding that there is no such thing as "no conditioning," we must actively work to instill spiritual conditioning.

Notice how Paul frames this challenge in [I Thessalonians 5:4-8](#), 12-13, 16-17:

But you, brethren, are not in darkness, so that this Day should overtake you [as a thief](#). You are all sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of darkness. Therefore let us not sleep, as others do, but let us watch and be sober. For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk are drunk at night. But let us who are of the day be sober, putting on the breastplate of

[faith](#) and [love](#), and as a helmet the hope of salvation. . . . And we urge you, brethren, to recognize those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake. Be at [peace](#) among yourselves. . . . Rejoice always, pray without ceasing. . . .

Paul reminds us that we, as children of the day, are to be on guard, vigilant. He warns us not to sleep but to watch and be sober, that is [self-controlled](#) and temperate. He urges us to build unity and harmony with our brethren and to let nothing impede it. In verse 12, we are reminded that God appoints ministers to be a primary source of our spiritual conditioning, teaching and warning us. Finally, in verses 16-17, rejoicing in God and praying constantly are advised.

Scripture admonishes us to maintain an uninterrupted and constant spirit of prayer so that we remain in a Christian frame of mind at all times. How often do we consider the faults that we know we should overcome yet have not (driving too fast, becoming angry with a driver who cut us off on the highway, eating unhealthy foods, procrastination, etc.)? We are often just like the apostle Paul who writes in [Romans 7:15-23](#) about desiring to do what is right yet being unable to do it. He clearly acknowledges that only God can deliver us from this state (verse 24-25).

Therefore, before we react to a stimulus there should be a moment of pro-action. We need to take this short time to ask God to help us overcome our weaknesses. In fact, in His model prayer, Christ teaches us to pray earnestly about our temptations. This is our daily struggle, and God alone can provide our daily bread, and with it, our ability to overcome.

There is a momentary gap between the stimulus—the action or activity we experience—and our response—our reaction to the action. We must—and we can—insert our conscious awareness into that gap and reject this world's conditioning. We need to remove the negative conditioning that is controllable—inappropriate friends, situations, media, etc. And since we are not Pavlov's puppies, we must also overcome our unconditioned nature that is quick to respond without careful thought. We are God's chosen people, blessed with the Holy Spirit and the ability to think and thereby to control our responses.

[Hebrews 4:14-16](#) reminds us not to forget to seek the help of the One who can truly give it:

Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, [Jesus](#) the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Through our spiritual conditioning—prayer, study, meditation, occasional fasting—let us properly utilize the gap between stimulus and response to think, to remember God's way, and then to choose it and live it.

- Bill Onisick

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by John W. Ritenbaugh

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