

Controlling The Gap

Conditional and Unconditional Responses

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It is there for a moment, a mere fraction of a second, and then it is gone, never to be seen again. It is how our training, our true character is tested, sometimes under the most severe circumstances. In fact, our very future in God's Kingdom rests on these moments of truth. And each day we experience hundreds if not thousands of these events or moments in time. You may have already guessed, but I am speaking about the gap between stimulus and response. The gap lasts only for a moment, but our response can last a lifetime.

And we only get one shot at it, so we must get it right the first time. There are no replays or redos in real life, and controlling the gap between stimulus and response is the fundamental responsibility of Christians. We must recognize its existence and learn to properly utilize this momentary space in time. During each gap, each moment of truth, we must maintain awareness and control as to react in a godly manner. Let us examine how we can be prepared to not be caught off guard, to respond accordingly during these everyday tests of faith.

Let us start with some background, some context. Stimulus is an agent, action, or condition that causes a corresponding activity or a response to occur. A response is our action that occurs as a result of the stimulus or stimuli, more than one stimulus. Our responses can be unconditional or natural, or they can be conditional, unnatural, or learned. Responses can take a variety of forms. They can be written. They can be verbal. They can be physical. They could be facial. An unconditional response means that the stimulus and the response are naturally connected. Our response unconditioned is a natural sequence of events, an unconscious, uncontrolled, and unlearned relationship. A simple example is if you try to touch your eye, your eye will naturally shut in self defense.

Likewise, our human nature has built within it hundreds of unconditional responses to various stimuli. Pride, self-preservation, and stubbornness are some of the common characteristics of our human nature that results in unconditional, often unfavorable responses. A conditioned response is just the opposite then. Conditioned response to stimuli are indeed unnatural, and they are learned through association. While you might not recognize the name, Ivan Pavlov did some early experiments with conditional responses. He noticed that a dog, when presented with food, would salivate.

So he then took a bell and rang a bell, fed the dog, and noticed that the dog would salivate. So bell, food, salivate. Over time he removed the food, and what was interesting is he had a conditional response. It was a learned behavior. With the bell came salivate without food. So this simple experiment using a dog concluded that animals and people can be conditioned or taught to respond, to associate a response that is not natural to a particular stimulus.

For more details on conditional responses, I am going to refer you to Martin Collins' sermon on conditional responses, and that is CGG sermon #488. But more of a modern day example in conditioning, I will use our dog Gadget. I actually consider him to be a 75 pound living rug, and I have to poke him every now and then just to make sure he is still alive. But it is amazing because he stores up all this energy by not moving a muscle the entire day. And when the sound of his food dish hits the counter, he leaps into action as if to gobble that food down just as fast as he can. It is absolutely amazing. It is like he hasn't eaten in weeks.

Now what happens when we take out a metal food dish and we start to prepare our dinner? You guessed it, Gadget comes running. He has been conditioned to the sound of that bowl, and it is unfortunate for him because he typically does not get any of that food.

We may think we are smarter than the average bear or in this case the average dog, but like it or not, from the time we were born, we too have been conditioned on a daily basis. Our parents, our relatives, our friends, our co-

workers, the TV, media, all condition us in both positive and negative ways, and we must understand that the cars we drive, the clothes we wear, the food we eat has all been conditioned within us.

Advertisers, the masters of conditioning, associate their products with attractive models most often wearing seductive clothing because they realized that good looking people naturally elicited 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 in an attempt to evoke a pleasant response. They exert a powerful and manipulative source of conditioning by using peer pressure and our emotions to make us think we cannot do without their product or service. Even the music, often in the form of a jingle, is carefully chosen to reinforce the positive feeling that they want associated with their products.

Now here is the hard part for Christians. Advertising is actually just one of the more visible conditioning influences in our world. So as humans we respond to conditioning and unfortunately our society, Satan's world, often rewards sinful behavior with positive reinforcement, so it is very confusing. The world is full of constant conditioning and our character, our behavior is most often impacted if we allow it. But as Christians we are called to spiritually remove ourselves from the world that we physically live within. It is our duty to remove the negative conditioning, the negative influences that are controllable, and we have the power to choose and avoid some—not all—of our negative conditioning.

And conditioning is by no means a new phenomenon. It has been part of Satan's weaponry since the beginning of man. In fact, God warned the Israelites not to be influenced or conditioned many times. He warned them not to adopt the practices of those around them. Let us look at an example in Leviticus 18, verses 1 through 5.

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. Jot down Deuteronomy 19:14 and a New Testament example, James 1:27, where James cautions us about being polluted by the world and that we are to keep oneself unspotted from the world. But conditioning is not necessarily a bad thing. How so? you may ask.

Well, changes in behavior are the result of our response to events, stimuli that produce a consequence, good or bad. The consequence serves to reinforce the behavior or the response. It could be a verbal praise or a feeling of accomplishment and satisfaction after we have done something right, or it could be the feeling of emptiness, a feeling of aloneness, separation from God as a result of sin. And we know that our life here is a training ground. We know that each stimulus we have an opportunity, albeit brief, to think about our purpose, to apply God's standards in an element of self-control before responding. These moments are our everyday trials that God uses to build our characters.

But how do we prepare for these trials? How do we overcome the ever-present pounding of Satan's conditioning on us? Well, we must offset Satan's conditioning and his world's evil influence with spiritual conditioning. Spiritual conditioning involves prayer, study, meditation. Spiritual conditioning prepares us by clearing our judgment and hence our response to trying situations. Spiritual conditioning reminds us of the consequences of our actions. It restores our fear in God and the consequences of sin, death.

And we are not alone in our battle over Satan's conditioning. Realizing how difficult it was to live in a world full of negative conditioning, God established the Sabbath, a dedicated day of spiritual conditioning. In addition, God established the holy days, annual days and even entire weeks that are dedicated to spiritual conditioning. We have all heard that if you are not moving forward, we are falling behind, and this statement is true because

there is no such thing as no conditioning. As long as we are living, we are experiencing various degrees of positive and negative conditioning in our lives.

Therefore, if we are not diligently working to create and instill positive influences and positive conditioning in our lives, we are by default being negatively conditioned by Satan and his world. Look at it this way: the sum of a negative number with no equal or greater positive number is in fact negative. Take $-2 + 0$, it is in fact -2 . So likewise, if our positive conditioning does not at a minimum outweigh the constant negative conditioning that is unavoidable in our lives, we are inevitably sliding backwards. The deck is stacked against us.

Each day we experience hundreds if not thousands of stimuli, and we must overcome unconditioned responses, our human nature. We must avoid where possible, the negative conditioning of the world. You can jot down in your notes II Corinthians 7:1. And with the understanding that there is no such thing as no conditioning, we must actively work to instill spiritual conditioning, prayer, study, and meditation.

Please turn with me to I Thessalonians 5, verse 4. We are picking up on a very familiar scripture here concerning the Lord's day coming as a thief in the night.

I Thessalonians 5:4-8 But you, brethren are not in darkness, so that this day should overtake you as a thief. You are sons of light and sons of the day. We are not of the night nor of the 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.

Drop down to verses 12.

I Thessalonians 5:12-13 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.

And finally, to verse 16,

I Thessalonians 5:16-17 Rejoice always, pray without ceasing.

Paul reminds us that we are Christians in the end time, children of light, and we are children in a day to be on guard, vigilant. He warns us not to sleep as the world sleeps, to watch and be sober, self-controlled and temperate. Paul reminds us to build unity, harmony with our brethren, and to let nothing, especially the lack of our self-control, impede it. In verse 12, we are reminded that our ministers are appointed by God to be a primary source of spiritual conditioning. They are here to teach us, to warn us, and we must apply their messages to our lives, and we must heed their warnings. Finally, in verse 16 and 17, we are told to rejoice always and pray without ceasing.

Paraphrasing *Barnes' Notes*, Barnes explains, We are to observe the duty of prayer in the closet, in the family, and in the assembly convened to call in the name of the Lord. We are to maintain an uninterrupted and constant spirit of prayer as to maintain a Christian frame of mind at all times. How often do we stop and think about the things we know that we should not do that we do, driving too fast, getting angry when someone cuts us off, eating unhealthy foods. Just like the apostle Paul, who wrote about his will to do what is right and his inability to do it, we struggle with the same things. And as Paul clearly acknowledged, it is only God that can deliver us from our body of death. And therefore, before each reaction to a stimulus, there should be a moment of proaction, a moment of prayer asking God to help us overcome our weakness, our self.

In fact, Christ teaches us to earnestly pray about our struggles, our temptations, in His model prayer. He understands that we want to do what is

right, but that we struggle within ourselves because we also want to do what is wrong. This is our daily struggle, and only God can provide our daily bread, and with it our ability to overcome.

As we conclude, there is a momentary gap between stimulus, the activity or action we experience, and our response, our reaction to the action. Likewise, we have a momentary gap between life and death. We should remain on guard, knowing that Satan plots to destroy us through his conditioning and that the Day of the Lord comes like a thief in the night.

We can—must—insert conscious awareness into the gap and not fall victim to the world's conditioning. We are to remove the negative conditioning that is within our control in appropriate TV, movies, etc. We must also overcome our unconditioned human nature that is quick to respond without careful thought. We are not Pavlov's puppy. We are God's chosen, blessed with the Holy Spirit and the ability to think and thereby control our responses. Turn with me to Hebrews 4:14.

Hebrews 4:14-16 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 us in the time of need.

Brethren, we are on the footsteps of the Passover and the Days of the Unleavened Bread which typify our coming out of sin and coming out of this world which so easily ensnares us. Let us take full advantage of this dedicated time of spiritual conditioning and through our spiritual conditioning, our prayer, our study, our meditation, let us properly utilize the gap between stimulus and response to think, to remember God's way, and then to choose it.