Happy New Year to everyone! We are starting a new teaching series in our worship services. I’ve entitled it “How to be Christian Today” – this is NOT on how to be A Christian, but how to be Christian. That is, how to respond to the many things happening around us in a Christ honoring way. We are going to think about what a victorious Christian life looks like in a culture that no longer sees eternal value in Jesus or the Bible. This is an encouragement series to help us be greater overcomers in this life through the power of Jesus. In the weeks ahead we are going to look at 9 contemporary challenges we face in our world which is becoming increasingly post-truth and post-Christian. Instead of lamenting these changes, or isolating ourselves, or becoming filled with worry & anxiety, we want to adopt Jesus’ & the Bible’s counter-cultural teachings so we can thrive in even a desert.

There's a brutal truth in life that some people refuse to accept: You have no control over many of the things that happen in your life. We waste a lot of our life trying to control what we cannot control and then we don’t see God do what only God can do!

- People try to control everything around them, thinking that will give them control in what they can’t control. Some try to be perfectionists, others micromanage, still others are constantly trying to manipulate or force people to do what they want. They falsely think that if they can gain enough control over other people and the situations they find themselves in, they can prevent bad things from happening.

- People also try to control by worrying. Now intellectually we know we can’t prevent bad things, like natural disasters and deadly diseases, from happening. But internally they have convinced themselves fretting about those potential problems will somehow make things less bad.

- People also try to control by isolating themselves. If I don’t read the news, then bad things won’t happen. If I separate myself from people I disagree, then life will get easier. If I can just legislate behavior in others that I struggle with, then life it will be easier for me. But, out-of-sight & out-of-mind doesn’t give us any control over the future.

- And of course some people also spend their lives blaming others for anything that doesn’t go their way. They don’t gain control over anything meaningful, in fact they become slaves to a victim mentality.

So before we can look more closely at the 9 contemporary challenges Christians face in modern day America, we need to learn a little bit about what we can and cannot control.

PROPOSITION: We can never overcome worry by continually obsessing about what we cannot control, but by giving that to God, seeing His perspective and acting on what we can control now about ourselves.

I. Doesn’t lose heart despite …
All of 2 Corinthians 4 that we read earlier, touches on our topic today. READ v 1. To “lose heart” means to get discouraged – it is to stop believing that you can succeed. “Losing heart” is when you become sad & depressed and are no longer interested in something because it is not progressing as you would like. Since explaining this whole chapter would take too long and I would go off on too many sidetracks, I want to primarily focus on the last 3 verses starting with v 16-18. READ. So what kind of challenges do we face in this life that can cause us to “lose hope”, “give-up”, “worry” or “be overcome with fear”?

A. Challenges in us 2 Cor 4:16, 7
First, there are challenges IN us that lead to wanting to give up. READ 2 Cor 4:16. “Wasting away outwardly” refers to what is happening with Paul physically. It is the result of sickness, beatings, age, lack of food or sleep – these and many other challenges can cause physical pain, emotional overload, headaches, fear, discouragement, weakness, etc. Focusing just on our inner physical, emotional and spiritual pain will naturally lead us to discouragement, depression and wanting to give up. But it doesn’t have to because the apostle Paul focuses on something else.

While ours will be different than the apostle Paul’s, today you and I all face inward challenges that can overwhelm us and cause deep pain, worry and anxiety regardless of what is happening around us or who is in our lives. These areas include sickness, disabilities, false expectations, dissatisfaction with our abilities, internal fears, insecurity, hidden sin, and of course, the inner accusations of satan & the demonic.

B. Challenges to us 2 Cor 4:17, 8-9, 11
Life would be hard enough with just our INNER challenges, but we also all face challenges TO us that come from outward people that lead us to want to give up or remain overwhelmed in life. READ 2 Cor 4:17. So what are these “light and momentary troubles” which are achieving eternal glory for the apostle Paul? Look back at verse 8. READ v 8-9, 11. The light and momentary troubles are the results of the early Christians sharing Jesus and standing for His truth. In Paul’s case it was opponents who physically beat him, false teachers who tried to undo what he had done, natural disasters, dangers in travel, and opposition all of which can easily overwhelm us today. In verse 11, he likened these to “being given over to death for Jesus’s sake”, that is they are very serious and they come because of Paul’s witness and service of Jesus.

So what challenges come TO us (from outside) that can overwhelm us and cause deep pain, worry and anxiety regardless of what is happening in us? These challenges include any attack from another person, relationships breaking up, mean words, natural disasters that impact you directly, money problems, losing a position, losing a friend or beloved relative, sin, accidents, injustice done to you, stealing from you, lies or deception told to you, others close to you going into sin, interpersonal conflicts. This list is endless but always involves someone or something else outside of you directly impacting you.
C. Challenges around us

There is a third area of challenges we all face that can lead to us to worry, fear or wanting to give up. These are challenges in the greater world around us. READ 2 Cor 4:18. “What is seen” refers to that which is happening around us now on this earth while what is “unseen” refers to what will happen around us in God’s presence after death, the millennium with our new resurrection bodies and eternity in the new heavens and earth. There are many things happening in our larger world that really discourage us even though they aren’t directly happening to us: like kids dying in famines, the pain of wars and regional conflicts, the injustice done to groups of people, the secularization of culture – again the list goes on.

Now none of these challenges in these three areas necessarily lead to despair, loss of hope and wanting to give up, but clearly any one of these challenges in just one of these areas can lead a person to despair. So what are some of the things that made a difference for Paul and can make a difference for any follower of Jesus? How can we freely talk about and study the problems & declines of society around us yet not end up fixated on the problem and overwhelmed with anxiety, fear or worry?

II. Separating what we can’t control from what we can control

A. Separate what we can’t control – let go & give to God

One thing we clearly see here that helps a Christian overcome a challenge in Jesus’ power is to identify and separate out what we cannot control. Or to say it another way, we must clearly admit what we cannot control and then not fixate on it. For example in verse 16, Paul can’t control whether he is outwardly (that is physically) wasting away. Instead, he sees the advancement in his inner character. In v 17, Paul can’t control many of the troubles he is personally facing in this life. Instead, he sees these as short compared to eternity and even achieving eternal glory! And in v 18, Paul can’t control what is happening around him right now so he doesn’t focus his thoughts primarily here, but let’s his mind see the bigger picture of a glorious eternity in heaven.

That may seem a bit vague so let’s quickly consider 3 other famous New Testament passages about worry and anxiety. Please turn to the second one – Philippians 4:6-7.

- In Matthew 6:25-34, Jesus specifically tells His followers, “do not worry about your life”, then explains that it is God who has control, not them and God does good for His people. Then v 34 concludes “Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” Jesus asks us to separate what we can not control – which is what is going to happen in the future – from what we can deal with right now.
• Philippians 4:6-7, God tells us, “Do not be anxious about anything” – that is easier said than done, right! So what are we supposed to do because I don’t know many people who can easily push worry, anxiety and fear out of their minds? **READ** v 6-7. So when fear, worry or anxiety arises, God asks us to present our requests for that situation directly to Him and to do that by prayer and petitions (a fancy way of saying clearly, attentively and straightforwardly ask God directly like a child would ask a good father). We know that is not natural – what we naturally do is focus on the problem, then get discouraged when our efforts aren’t getting anywhere so that greater worry, fear and anxiety overcomes us. God want us to separate out what we can not control and bring that in faith to the only One in control – God Himself. And then let God decide how and what to do. It is not until we release these worries to God – these things we can’t control – it is not until that point that we can begin to experience God’s peace inside of us.

• In a similar way, I Peter 5:6-7 tells us, “Cast all your anxiety (worries, fears, overwhelming concerns) — Cast all you anxiety on God because He cares for you.” Again, we have to recognize that we can’t handle or solve whatever is worrying us and instead give those back to God in faith because He is in control and can do something about that. Interestingly, the context of this promise is humbling ourselves before God. It take humility to admit what we can’t do and can’t control.

What do you find yourself worrying about lately? What is overwhelming you in life currently? What is stealing the peace that God gives us? We get stuck in life when we focus, ruminate and keep thinking about what we cannot control. For example …

• We can’t control the weather, but I have yet to see an outdoor wedding in our area where someone in the bridal party doesn’t fervently ask prayers for good weather.

• We can’t control the future, or when we will die, or when sickness unexpectedly comes on us, but I see lots of people thinking they are the exception and if they just do this or take that it can’t happen to them.

• We can’t control how other people will act or respond. Yet, some people spend endless hours trying to change the environment so another person will act or respond as they wish. But that rarely works.

Can you or I control how long the partial government shutdown will last? Or whether North Korea will use a nuclear bomb? Or whether a terrible storm will devastate our area? Absolutely not! Nor can we control whether our friend will become a Christian, our parents will stay together, our spouse will remain healthy, or whether a blemish will pop up on our face at an inopportune time!

When we focus on what we cannot control, it is easy to take on the “learned helplessness” perspective you see around in our country. Picture being overwhelmed
by some problem like what our economy might do this next year. Fear, worry and anxiety arise, that is natural. But when we keep focusing just on the problem, we begin to see much more negative in the other events that are happening around us. This reinforces our belief that “everything is going bad”. The more we focus on what we cannot control, the more we get paralyzed by that fear and we do not do the things we can control. More learning and information turns to greater sense of helplessness. Worrying doesn’t take away tomorrow’s troubles; it takes away today’s peace.

B. Be clear and realistic about what we can control – be wise

Let’s turn back to 2 Corinthians 4. It is interesting that the overwhelming situation that triggers this discussion in chapter 4 has to do with the results of trying to bring the good news of Jesus to all those around us. We painfully feel their spiritual lostness, get frustrated with their lack of understanding, are hurt by their mockery and attacks, get disillusioned everyone doesn’t come to Jesus easily and start feeling like we are a total failure! It is easy to see why we can get full of fear and worry to the point of losing hope when it comes to bringing Jesus’ life giving message to those around us. Is it our fault? Are we failures? READ v 2. Paul continues on admitting he is not able to make someone a Christian, convince others that Jesus is the only way, take away demonic blinders to the truth or say the gospel in a way that no one will get upset. Paul has no control over their actions, decisions or reaction. He only has control over what he says and the attitude he says it with. Paul determines not going to soft-pedal the demands of the gospel, or manipulate someone’s feelings to get a decision or distort the truths of the Bible to make something less offensive. So, besides identifying and releasing to God what he has no control over, Paul also looks for what “positive thing” he can do right now in this area. He doesn’t put false hopes with his action. This allows him not to feel like giving up when major problems or set-backs arise. He can control what he says. And he can also see that these actions are good and right for the long run.

Let’s take a short digression here. I think most everyone of us here would say that “hopelessness” is bad. Yet I was fascinated the last couple weeks by some statements Dr. Henry Cloud makes about hopelessness. From his Facebook page: “Hey Guys - The time when you get to hopelessness can be one of the best moments for your future. To give up hope that something is going to change when it is not going to gets you unstuck immediately and brings energy. It brings life to the sickness of hope deferred.” Henry Cloud encourages people, especially Christians, to look at hopelessness as something that is very important for growth in this life - he even feels it is often good. Now if you are like me, you are thinking, “what are you talking about?” How can hopelessness ever be good? It is what drives people to give up, quit, break relationships, get on drugs, become drunk and even want to take their life? Cloud claims this same hopelessness finally frees us to let go of something we won’t let go of any other way, allowing positive changes to finally come by what we can do (or control) rather than being stuck on something we can’t control. For example, true drug addicts and alcoholics have to hit “rock bottom” before they can experience true
recovery. They have to hit the point of hopelessness before they will consider actions that will bring real change. This is a key turning point in many areas we struggle with – until we hit a form of hopelessness, we are not ready to change, risk or try something we have never done before. Hopelessness becomes a gift when we use it to rightly see reality and then head towards something better. It's a choice. And that choice often involves separating what we cannot change from what we can change. Or what we cannot control from what we can control. Coming to this point where we let go of what we can't control (most of the people and situations around us) and instead putting our energy and efforts in what we CAN CONTROL about ourselves, brings energy and hope back into oppressive situations.

C. See through the problem to what God can do – faith 2 Cor 4:3-4, 7, 7-9, 10
Now as Christians, we have even a greater power in this area because of our relationship with the true God of this Universe. Not only can God do something about what we have no control over, but God can also help us change the problem from a mirror we are obsessed with to a window that shows us a great picture of God and His ways.

• So in v 3-4, we can see through our loved ones’ rejection of Jesus and His ways and see there is a real spiritual battle behind that with genuine evil spiritual forces blinding people. That window opens up many positive things we can do right now especially through prayer. We get to battle the forces of evil when they are captive to them.

• In v 7, we see through our failures and blemishes to see that God can actually use those failures and weaknesses to show His power and reality! Your weaknesses and my weaknesses do not slow down God’s plan!

• In v 8-9, as Christians, we can see through our discouragements and defeats and see God is actually giving us victory. Absolutely we will feel hard-pressed, perplexed, persecuted and struck down. Staying at that mirror will sap every bit of spirit from us. But when we open the blinds – when we change that from a mirror to a window we see the incredible power of God for we haven’t been crushed, we are not enslaved to dismal despair, we haven’t been abandoned by Jesus and we definitely can’t be destroyed – for at best they can take our physical life now, but a better one awaits us for eternity. And there are far more examples in this chapter, each encouraging us to turn that mirror just reflecting the problem, fear or worry into a window where we see the bigger perspective because of Jesus.

D. Decide on an action you can do that joins God in His work
So when you and I become overwhelmed in life it is good to stop and admit what we can not control. Let go of that and give it to God. Then see something you yourself can do in that area that you genuinely have control over. That is just going to deal with your actions, your thoughts, your attitudes and it doesn't depend on anything anyone else needs to do. Then decide on an action, like Paul does in v 2, which helps you join
God in His work. Can you control how your parents, friends or children respond to you? Absolutely not, but you can control how you respond to them. While you can plan a party, you can't make people have fun. To have the most influence, focus on changing your behavior. Be a good role model and set healthy boundaries for yourself. When you have concerns about someone else's choices, share your opinion, but only share it once. Don't try to fix people who don't want to be fixed.

III. In times of worry, make a list of what you can and cannot personally control today

A simple helpful action you and I can take when we are overwhelmed is simply take a piece of paper, draw a line down the middle (from top to bottom) and on one side admit to God what you can not control. Then on the other side what you can control. Then give the left hand side to God in faith and ask for His help in carrying out some of the things to the right.

A. What I cannot control
- I cannot control whether China and the US will end their trade war this year.
- I cannot control whether North Korea will launch a nuclear missile
- I cannot control what is going to happen to the United States stock market
- I cannot control what the Fed is going to do with interest rates
- I cannot control what children are being taught by American society as a whole
- I cannot control what TV shows have in them, what movies are made, what statements are written on peoples social media.
- I cannot control what people say to me, how they look at me or if they will talk to me
- I can't control the future or what world my kids will inherit

B. What I can control
In contrast here some things that I can affect, influence or control in these situations.
- I can control my response to all these things – whether I’m going to respond in faith or fear. Whether I am going to let the problem stay a mirror or become a window I can see God’s greatness through
- I can control whether I am modeling the virtues and standing for the truths I believe will make our nation and this world a better place
- I can control how I respond to my parents, treat my kids or care for my spouse
- I can control what I do with my day, my thoughts and my future
- I can control whether I will pray for my neighbors and for Christ’s kingdom to come
- I can choose to take a step towards living by faith rather than living in fear
- I can control how I will use my abilities or influence and what goals I point them towards.
- I can choose to believe that God has placed me here, now, for a purpose. AND that He can use my pathetically insignificant but sacrificial actions to do far more than I could ever imagine. Keep overcoming in the power of Jesus!