

The Wired Word

Student Handout

Sunday, December 13, 2020 --- from 9:00-9:45am

Zoom ONLY

Meeting ID: 860 8980 7220 --- Passcode: 195152

Dear Class Member,

Our next lesson introduces a Japanese concept, *jishuku*, loosely defined as voluntary self-restraint for the sake of others, that many credit with keeping the impact of Covid-19 low across the island nation. We take the opportunity to explore the biblical notion of self-control and self-discipline, as a fruit of God's Spirit and a sign of God's work in individuals and groups of people.

How To Participate:

We are offering The Wired Word class live via Zoom. The Wired Word Zoom discussion will be from 9:00am-9:45am on Sunday mornings. You can also use these resources to reflect or study on your own, with your family/friends, and/or with your Abide Group.

Until further notice, there is NO in-person Sunday school due to the COVID-19 Pandemic.

You can participate in the Wired Word virtually by Zoom on your computer or smart device at:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/86089807220?pwd=eStWa0ZZK0hOTVdwU0pjZlMrdk5ydz09>

or by telephone (land line or cell phone) by calling: 1-301-715-8592

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All Sunday School Classes, including the Wired Word, are cancelled for Dec 27, & Jan 3

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Japan's Practice of '*Jishuku*,' Self-Restraint for the Sake of Others, Credited with Limiting the Spread of Covid-19

The Wired Word for the Week of December 13, 2020

In the News

In her recent opinion piece about how Japan has managed to keep coronavirus contagion, hospitalization and death rates so low (with a death rate as of Tuesday of 19 per million), writer Kaki Okumura credited the cultural practice of *jishuku*, or voluntarily restraining from fun, travel, revelry, luxury and celebration, in a show of support and empathy for people adversely affected by the pandemic. According to worldometer.com, death rates due to Covid-19 range from less than one per million in Thailand to almost 1,500 per million in Belgium; the U.S. rate of 884 falls between the rates in France (862) and the UK (912).

During the 2011 earthquake and tsunami that resulted in the Fukushima nuclear power plant disaster, Japan's then-Prime Minister Abe appealed to citizens to practice *jishuku*, as evidence of camaraderie and solidarity for victims, first responders and volunteers helping to rebuild homes and clean up radioactive waste.

In both emergencies, cherry blossom festivals, graduations, sports events, concerts, weddings, parties and other social activities were canceled or postponed; shops were closed or sparsely populated with consumers. Similar actions were also seen in the United States this past spring, when people voluntarily reduced contact with others prior to any government-imposed restrictions.

The Japanese believe that the adjustments they are making now due to the pandemic, while painful, are temporary, only until Covid-19 is beaten into submission.

What makes *jishuku* different from forced government lockdowns, fines or legal requirements to wear face masks and the like?

Okumura says that the Japanese are motivated to adopt public health measures out of consideration for others, not because of a top-down mandate from officials or the threat of punishment from the government. *Jishuku* refers to the power dynamic of peer pressure in Japan's *seken* (defined as a traditional, communal societal structure that is more than a collection of individuals who are constrained by laws to keep them in line; instead, social cohesion relies on "the pressure of the public eye," as one publication put it).

One potential problem with the *seken* model of society is that homogeneity is valued above individual creativity. The Japanese proverb about the nail that sticks out getting hammered down is an expression of that concept. Anyone who is different in some way risks being pushed out of the *seken* as someone who doesn't belong in the group.

One feature of the *seken* worldview is that one person's illness is a kind of *kegare* (pollution, defilement or contamination) originating from outside the group that puts the whole society in danger. Wearing a mask or social distancing may be a way of visually expressing the need to separate the sick from the well, the unclean from the clean, the dirty outsider from the pure insider. This way of thinking is reminiscent of the requirement that lepers in biblical times cover their mouths with their hands while yelling out, "Unclean! Unclean!" whenever non-lepers approached.

While the *seken* worldview appears to have contributed to keeping Japan's death toll from Covid-19 much lower than the West's, it may also lead to greater discrimination, shunning, harassment and attacks, particularly against sick people and their families, and against those who seem to be flouting rules meant to protect the community from disease.

"Japan is a group society, unlike the individualistic society we are living in," explained Judith DeRolf, a retired missionary with 30 years experience in Yokohama, Japan. "[In a] group society ... you always look out for what is good for the group," beginning "with the neighborhood and extend[ing] out to the entire country. ... it means neighbor to neighbor, community to community. Each person looks out for others over self."

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Pandemic Lessons From Japan: A Tradition of Considering Others. *Yes Magazine*](#)
[Obeying the Rules Around Us: The Covid-19 Pandemic's Impact on Japanese Society. *Nippon.com*](#)
[Understanding the Need to Shame Someone on Social Media for Not Exercising Self-restraint During a Pandemic. *The Japan Times*](#)

Applying the News Story

In the Bible, we can find many examples of how lack of self-restraint, self-control and self-discipline impact human relations, the environment, and how people interact with God. The first sin in the Garden of Eden can be seen as a failure to curb or control human desires. The Ten Commandments can be seen as setting boundaries to guard against harmful expressions of anger, power, sexual urges, viewpoints and beliefs.

Many passages point to the importance of disciplining ourselves in the way we communicate, so that we are quick to listen, and slow to speak (Proverbs 10:19; 29:20; James 1:19-20). Other verses advise us to be slow to anger (Proverbs 12:16; 14:29; 15:18; 29:22), and to refrain from strife and quarreling (Proverbs 20:3). And yet again, biblical examples abound about the need to restrain one's ambition (Proverbs 25:6-7, 27-28), appetite and avarice (Proverbs 23:1-8; 25:16), alcohol consumption (Proverbs 23:29-35; 31:4-5) and sexual immorality (2 Corinthians 12:21).

Lack of self-control can have a negative effect not only on the person who fails to exercise self-discipline, but on others as well. "For the LORD brought Judah low because of King Ahaz of Israel," for example, "for he had behaved without restraint in Judah and had been faithless to the LORD" (2 Chronicles 28:19). Because of the

ruler's faithlessness and lack of self-restraint, Judah lost battles with multiple enemies, who slaughtered tens of thousands and took hundreds of thousands of his people captive.

It is the Holy Spirit who produces the fruit of self-control in a person (Galatians 5:22-23). Paul urged church leaders and all followers of Jesus to practice self-control (Titus 1:8; 2:5-14), as did Peter (2 Peter 1:6). So we focus on how we can cooperate with the Holy Spirit in growing this fruit in our lives.

The Big Questions

1. What scriptures can you remember that reflect a communal understanding of salvation, rather than an understanding of salvation as focused on the individual? How -- if at all -- does this differ from an understanding of salvation of individuals within a community of other saved individuals? What difference does our understanding of salvation as being primarily about the individual, or primarily about the community, make in how we live out our faith?
2. When, if ever, have you witnessed the harmful effects of loss of self-control?
3. How can we strengthen our own ability to control ourselves?
4. Why do people sometimes seem more inclined to try to control or restrain others rather than themselves?
5. Should *jishuku*, or something like it, be practiced by the church? If so, how can your church effectively appeal to people to practice *jishuku* (self-restraint for the good of others)?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Proverbs 6:23

*For the commandment is a lamp and the teaching a light,
and the reproofs of discipline are the way of life ...* (For context, read 6:20-29, 32-35.)

Proverbs 14:1, 15-16

*The wise woman builds her house,
but the foolish tears it down with her own hands. ...*

*The simple believe everything,
but the clever consider their steps.*

*The wise are cautious and turn away from evil,
but the fool throws off restraint and is careless.* (For context, read 14:1, 15-18.)

Proverbs 25:28

*Like a city breached, without walls,
is one who lacks self-control.* (No context needed.)

In Proverbs 6, the writer urges his child to keep his commands and not to forsake his mother's teachings, because they would give him light to guide him in the way of life (vv. 21-23.) The writer was especially concerned about a married woman who might entice him into an illicit sexual relationship that could prove dangerous, even deadly; he could be dishonored, disgraced, and destroyed by his own poor choices (vv. 24-29, 32-35).

In Proverbs 14, we are presented with the stark contrast between wise and foolish people. The wise are portrayed as thoughtful, careful, cautious, clever, knowledgeable and constructive, while the foolish are depicted as careless people who act first, think later, who destroy what they should cherish and protect, who fall for any con, who refuse to discipline themselves and chafe at any boundaries or restraints.

Proverbs 25:28 compares a person who lacks self-control to a city that lacks any walls for protection against attack. The lack of self-restraint for selfish purposes actually has the effect of undermining everything that makes for their self-interest.

Questions: From whom did you learn about self-control or lack thereof? What were the lessons you learned about that subject? How do those lessons compare with the principles found in these scriptures? How have you built on, or attempted to deconstruct, the lessons you learned about self-control early in your life?

2 Timothy 1:7-10

... for God did not give us a spirit of cowardice, but rather a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline. Do not be ashamed, then, of the testimony about our Lord or of me his prisoner, but join with me in suffering for the gospel, relying on the power of God, who saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace. This grace was given to us in Christ Jesus before the ages began, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. (For context, read 1:5-10.)

Paul reminds his protege Timothy to "rekindle the gift of God" within him (v. 6), which he explains is "a spirit of power and of love and of self-discipline." It is by the power of God who raised Christ from the dead that Timothy can overcome feelings of shame and endure suffering for the gospel with Paul. This is the grace given to us in Christ Jesus (see also John 1:14, 16-17).

Questions: How do power, love and self-discipline work together in the life of the Christian? What if one of those qualities is missing? How might knowing that God has given us this spirit of power, love and self-discipline help us overcome a spirit of fear in all its forms, whether cowardice, timidity, panic or paranoia?

Hebrews 12:1-2, 11-13

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. ... Now, discipline always seems painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. Therefore lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed. (For context, read 12:1-13.)

Although the word "self-control" is not found in this chapter, the parallel concept of discipline permeates it. The writer says that parents discipline their children in the best way they know how, and children respect their parents for it (vv. 9-10). God also disciplines his children whom he loves and accepts as his own, "for our good, in order that we may share his holiness" (vv. 5-10). If we accepted discipline from our human parents, shouldn't we accept it from our heavenly Father, the author of Hebrews asks?

Our own ability to "[e]ndure trials for the sake of discipline" (v. 7) without growing weary or losing heart is Jesus himself, who "for the sake of the joy that was set before him" as the goal at the finish line of his race of faith endured "hostility against himself from sinners" and "the cross, disregarding its shame" (vv. 2-3).

Jesus' endurance of the suffering and humiliation of the cross can be seen as a kind of self-discipline or self-restraint. When the natural reaction to being treated unfairly, maligned, slandered, cruelly abused and mistreated would be to lash out at the persecutors, Jesus controlled the urge to take revenge, even though he would have been justified if he had given in to that impulse. But he was after a bigger prize than saving his own skin.

Questions: What was that prize, the joy at the end of his race, that Jesus was after?

How can you recognize if and when a painful experience is God's discipline? What gives you courage to accept God's discipline even when it is painful? What is "the peaceful fruit of righteousness" produced in those who are trained by God's discipline?

How can "looking to Jesus" unlock the secret to successfully enduring trials in our own lives?

1 Corinthians 9:19, 22-25

For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. ... I have become all things to all people, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so

that I may share in its blessings. Do you not know that in a race the runners all compete, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win it. Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one. (For context, read 9:18-27.)

In this chapter, Paul explains why he and Barnabas are qualified as apostles and defends their rights to be supported by the church they serve, to be married to and accompanied by believing wives (vv. 1-11, 13-14). Nonetheless, he says they have not made use of their rights, lest their legitimate claims might become "an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ" (v. 12).

Instead of standing up for their individual rights, Paul and Barnabas focused on the reward they wanted to receive from making the gospel as free and accessible as possible to as many people as possible (v. 18). To accomplish that goal, Paul says he "made himself a slave to all" ... an act that no doubt required a prodigious amount of self-restraint and self-control. Instead of living to please himself, or to cater to his own personal preferences, he voluntarily exercised self-control in all things, to receive an imperishable wreath of a champion in the race of faith.

Questions: What constituted that imperishable wreath that Paul pursued so zealously? How committed are you to doing whatever you can to win an imperishable wreath from the hand of the Lord? How are you training for that spiritual race?

Give an example of a time when you disciplined yourself to not cater to your own personal preferences, for the sake of your testimony to the gospel?

For Further Discussion

1. [Rev. Paul Rock](#) of Second Presbyterian Church in Kansas City, Missouri, said that while some animals can survive for long periods of time in relative isolation, humans, like bees and ants, are constructed to be ultra-relational, in community. What do you think that means? Do you see any biblical explanation for that understanding of human nature, and if so, where?

2. Consider this, from Judith DeRolf, who spent 30 years as a missionary working with university students in Yokohama, Japan: "Japan is not based on Euro-Christian ethics but does have a strong ethical society based mostly on Buddhism and Shintoism with a bit of Christianity thrown in since WWII. There is a deeply spiritual aspect to the meaning of the word *Jishuku*. Looking out for others is a very Christian idea. People caring for others by wearing masks, keeping social distance and ... [doing what needs] to be done to protect each other and the country [is an ethic found in] Christian, Buddhist, and Shinto traditions."

Why is it that the United States of America, which some identify as a Christian country, at times seems to have difficulty caring for others as our faith teaches we should, while some nations that are not based on Christian doctrine at times seem to be doing a better job looking out for others?

3. Think about this, from Clay Boutwell, author and owner of [The Japan Shop](#): "One new phrase is *jishuku keisatsu*. These are people who report on others who aren't properly *jishuku*-ing. In English, [such a person is 'a Karen.'](#) I'm not sure how it started and I feel sorry for any ladies named Karen, but it refers to a busybody who is always pointing his or her finger at others not doing what Karen expects them to do."

[Another source](#) says these *jishuku keisatsu* (self-restraint police) are "'justice addicts' [who] ... treat hunting down offenders as a game," in which they self-righteously appoint themselves to shame, humiliate and expose people they presume are doing something wrong.

[Another source](#) describes "self-restraint police" as "people who make anonymous threats, protests and even official complaints against those who do not comply with official requests." The idea is to use peer pressure to make people "conform to societal norms" and stop "causing trouble for the *seken*" (community). Instead of legal penalties for violating communal norms, those thought to be violators are subject to punishment "to be meted out by the *seken* itself ... even when no legal penalty is warranted, and regardless of any consideration of human rights or civil liberties." The problem, if there is one, with *jishuku*, is that "the collective" can quickly descend into a lynch mob of vigilantes who take the law into their own hands.

How might the misuse of *jishuku* compare to "cancel culture" trends in the West? To efforts to repress

people protesting injustice or corruption around the world?

What potential dangers might come from the practice of *jishuku keisatsu*? How could those dangers be avoided, while retaining the positive aspects of *jishuku*?

4. TWW team member Heidi Mann wrote: "When my son was around 14 or so and was acting up, I said he should pray for the Holy Spirit to give him the fruit of self-control. He scoffed, 'Self-control isn't even one of the fruits of the Spirit!' So I made him look up Galatians 5:22-23 and check for himself. So he starts reading: 'Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness -- oh.' He was pretty sheepish, and I was laughing hysterically!"

Have you ever prayed, or would you ever ask for the Holy Spirit to give you the fruit of self-control? Why or why not?

5. Discuss this from TWW team member Frank Ramirez: "I think one of the flaws of American Christianity is that it is so self-centered. People talk about the moment they were saved as individuals and not about salvation as a society. I am an individual, so I see the world through my set of eyes, ... but the prophets rail at us for being a rebellious people. The Revelator looks into heaven and sees a multitude praising God, not just me and my friends."

"[Some Americans] ... think that their rights are being taken away during this pandemic," Ramirez continued. "During World War II, people had ration books, raised victory gardens and made sacrifices for what they perceived as a greater good. ... We accept that we must wear seat belts in our vehicles, or shoes and shirts if we go into a restaurant."

Whether or not you agree with Ramirez' description of American Christianity, he's not the only person who views many expressions of Christianity in the West as self-centered. How can we best counter those perceptions of Christianity?

Responding to the News

Brainstorm ways your church or group can more effectively function as *seken* (community) for its members of all ages.

Prayer suggested by Jeremiah 14:1-22

O God, truly we have loved to wander, and have not restrained our feet from violating your "No Trespassing" signs you have established to keep us safe from danger. Our behavior has led to devastation, shame and grief. None can save us, except you alone. We set our hope on you, O God. Have mercy on us, and save us from our self-centeredness, that your name might be honored by all who witness the miracle of our transformation, for Jesus' sake, and by the power of his Spirit. Amen.