

Choosing Life

I have an important question for us to think about this morning. The question is this: How much do our choices matter? Do you believe in free will or fate? Do you think that everything is predestined or that today's decisions can change tomorrow's outcomes.

Now before you give a quick answer, let me tell you that theologians and philosophers have been arguing about this question for as long as theologians and philosophers have existed. And even the Bible seems to give conflicting opinions. The Christian church has often split on this issue, some believing that everything is predestined and others insisting that we have free will.

Betty Jane and I have been watching an interesting series on Television called "Timeless." It's about two groups of people who each have a time machine. The one group wants to go back in time to change things for personal gain in the present. The other group goes back in time to thwart the efforts of the personal gain group. As the first season of this series of episodes reaches its conclusion, it would seem the lesson to be learned goes something like this: The things they do, do have significance in the short run, but in the long run, history has a way of righting itself no matter what they do to change it. The big picture stays the same. History goes where history is destined to go.

To put it in biblical terms, we find in Scripture that God has a plan for the world that He is going to bring to its proper conclusion. There is a struggle to get there but in the end there will be a new heaven and a new earth. The kingdoms of this world will become the kingdom of our God and of His Christ. We have read to the end of the book and we know, in the end, God wins!

In the big picture, God will take history where history is supposed to go. But for our limited time on earth our choices matter and will effect our lives and other's lives for good or evil.

Moses gives the word of God: "*See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess.*"

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But (and here is a significant exercise of our freedom) if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess."

What we see here is that the choices we make in our lives will have real consequences for good or for ill. If God's people are faithful to God and do what He commands them to do, all will be well. His people will live, their lives and the influence of their lives will be multiplied in this world. The blessing of the Lord will be with them wherever they go. Certainly, they will have some of the same troubles that are common to all people on this planet, but in the end God will deliver them from them all; God will give them victory.

On the other hand, God's people are free to choose evil if they insist on doing so. And, if they choose to bow down to the idols of this world in place of God, and if they choose to live in ignorance and in disobedience to God's word, they will condemn themselves to much suffering and an early demise.

Deuteronomy 30:19-20 gives the summary challenge Moses delivers to the people of Israel:

"This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the Lord is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob."

What we notice in these two verses is that not only do our choices effect us; but, they also have consequences for others. Our children will be effected by our choices and their choices will effect the lives of their children. Thus when we choose life for ourselves, we are also offering life to them. And, when we choose to ignore God, and to sin, we are increasing the likelihood that our children and even our grandchildren will inherit a legacy of death, for the wages of sin is death.

Another thing I see here is the unequivocal proclamation as found in verse 20: "*For the Lord is your life.*" **To choose the Lord is to choose**

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life. To reject the Lord is to choose death. I hope you realize that when I preach the gospel to you I am fighting for your lives!

I also hope we all realize that we have the opportunity to fight for the lives of others. To share Christ with others is to give them a chance to choose life. To keep Christ to ourselves and fail to share Him with others is to keep them in the dark and in the clutches of death. We must always remember that we are called to be the ambassadors of Christ. We need to make Christ known and so give all of those around us the chance to choose Him and thus to choose life over death.

As we turn our attention now to our gospel message from Matthew 5, we see that choosing the life God offers us also involves how we relate to other people. This is clear even in the Ten Commandments, in which the first 4 commandments tell us how to relate to God and the remaining 6 commandments tell us how to relate to other people.

Too much of our traditional evangelical teaching, preaching, and hymnology presents a "me and Jesus" scenario. It's all about our individual salvation. The beloved hymn, "In the Garden" is a case in point: "He walks with me and talks with me and He tells me I am His own And the joy we share as we tarry there none other has ever known." It's all about me and Jesus, as if the rest of the world didn't exist, as if no other people exist or matter.

Now it's true that we each need an individual relationship with Jesus. We need alone times with Jesus. Jesus often spent the night alone in prayer to the Father and we would do well to follow His example. It's 100% OK to sing "In the Garden." But, there has to be more than that. Our relationship with Jesus, if it is real, will necessarily effect our relationship with other people because He cares about them with the same passion He cares about us. He suffered and died for us and also for them.

We need to keep that thought firmly fixed in our minds all the time. We will never ever meet another person whom God does not love or wishes not to redeem. Our choices matter and our relationships with others also matter.

In Matthew 5:21-22, Jesus says this: "*You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder, and anyone who*

murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with a brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says to a brother or sister, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the court. And anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.”

This passage is interesting and perhaps also troubling. If I were to ask you which is the number one worst thing a person could do according to the Ten Commandments, what would you say? For those who are the more theologically enlightened, they might say worshiping another god in place of God Almighty. They might say that idolatry is the biggest sin, the worst thing one might do. If you thought that or agree with that I would have to say that you are right. God hates idolatry and hates it most of all when His people divorce Him to run after other gods. Idolatry is a great sin and opens the door to all other sins.

But if I were to ask this same question among most people outside the church, what do you think they would choose as the greatest sin, according to the Ten Commandments? My guess is that most people would say to kill another human being. They would say “Thou shalt not kill” is the most important commandment to obey.

Perhaps this is why Jesus puts so much emphasis on the 5th commandment here. A lot of people would have been glad to hear Him say that committing murder is the worst thing one person might do to another. But Jesus ups the ante doesn't He? Murdering someone is definitely evil but cursing him and holding anger against her are equally evil. Despising a fellow human being will put you as close to hell as anything else you might do. The point here is that relationships matter and our relationships with other human beings matter on par with our relationship with God.

But it goes even further. Look at Matthew 5:23 & 24: *“Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.”*

Not only do our relationships with other people matter on par with our relationship with God, but our broken relationships with other people can block and hinder our relationship with God. Thus, Jesus is

telling us that if we have come to worship God and remember that we are out of fellowship with a fellow believer or have a wrong attitude toward anyone, we need to do our best to fix that before we can truly worship and serve God.

To choose life is to choose the way of love. The little letter of I John is all over this subject. In I John 2:9-11, John says, *“Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness. Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness; he does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him.”*

I John 3:14-15: sound like John must have been listening carefully to Jesus' words in Matthew 5. John says, *“We know we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers. Anyone who does not love remains in death. Anyone who hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life in him.”*

Going back to the words of Moses in Deuteronomy 30:15, Moses says, *“See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction.”* To choose life means to love God with all our hearts, mind and strength and to obey His commands. To choose life also means to love one another and to love our neighbors as ourselves. It's not within our call or power to change the big picture or to alter the trajectory of history, but we can change the little picture by choosing each day to live in and after God's love. Once again, it's all about His love.

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Deuteronomy 30:15-20;

Matthew 5:21-26

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