

Deuteronomy 30:15-20, Matthew 5:21-37
Epiphany 6A
February 16, 2020

“Choices, Choices, Choices”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Moses addresses God’s people on the banks of the Jordan River as they prepare to enter the Promised Land, (Deuteronomy 30:19-20) *“I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life ...”*

Life is filled with choices. Many are insignificant. Sometimes the significance isn’t apparent until after many other choices. For example, all the choices I made early in life – growing up in Tucson, going to college in LA, moving to Wyoming, and deciding, one night, to go to happy hour at the Albany Bar & Grill ... where I met Shauna and then made the choice to ask her to marry me. Then she had the choice to say “Yes” or “No” ... fortunately she chose to say, “Yes.”

There’s a game show about making choices, “Let’s Make a Deal.” It’s still on after 57 years. When I was a kid, Monty Hall would say, *“Well Joan, you can keep the \$100 cash in your hand. Or ... you can go for what’s in this big box sitting before you!”* Who knows what’s hidden in the box? It could be the keys to a new car ... or it could be a package of toy cars. Joan has a choice ... take the \$100 or take a chance on the unknown. *“What’ll it be Joan?”*

In Deuteronomy we see Moses “Hall” in Old Testament “Let’s Make a Deal.” But there’s a difference ... nothing is hidden. Moses says, *“Okay Israel it’s time to make a deal! Over here you’ve got ‘life and good’ ... and here you’ve got ‘death and evil.’ What’ll it be?”* After 40 years of wandering in the wilderness, the people know all about God. They’ve seen and heard Him ... they’ve experienced firsthand God’s power and protection. Getting ready to finally enter the Promised Land, they had two choices ... “life and good” or “death and evil.” nothing is hidden.

On the one hand, (Deuteronomy 30:16) *“If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you today, by loving the LORD your God ... then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it.”*

On the other hand, (Deuteronomy 30:17) *“If your heart turns away, and you ... are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them ... you shall surely perish.”*

The choice seems rather obvious, who doesn't want life? And just what does it mean to “choose life”? Well God's Word made it pretty clear ... obey the commandments, keep the commandments. That's all. Then, you'll have life. Seems pretty straight forward. The commandments ... we've heard them ... *“You shall not have other gods or misuse the name of the Lord your God, and you shall remember the Sabbath. You shall honor your father and mother. And, you shall not murder, commit adultery, steal, give false testimony against your neighbor, or covet your neighbor's house, people, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.”* Ten items. That shouldn't be so hard to do. Our Confirmation students have been studying these commands the past several weeks. Hopefully they can tell you what Israel found out, it sounds easy, but it's not. There's a lot more to them than meets the eye.

And God knows how hard it is, which is why He tried to make the choice and consequence very clear as His people prepared to enter the land He promised Abraham 700 years earlier. God knew the choices His people would face as they crossed the Jordan. Based on His personal experience with His first children, Adam and Eve, God knew these sons and daughters of Adam and Eve would be hard-pressed with these choices. They'd be facing powerful armies supporting influential kings. They'd be facing the many gods these kings and armies worshipped. They'd see the good life these people appeared to have ... riches, power, affluence, and the ability to satisfy their selfish desires anyway they chose to. God knew this would look good to His

people's worldly eyes ... He knew they'd have a choice ... continue to trust in Him for all things or turn away from Him to worship and serve the false gods of the people they'd soon face. So, God laid out the two choices they had, **(Deuteronomy 30:15b)** *"life and good, death and evil."*

Sounds easy, but God knows it isn't. Over the course of the next several hundred years, God's people chose "death and evil" – succumbing to Satan's temptations, rejecting the Lord God, Yahweh while turning to worship the false gods in their midst. They ignored their Creator's commandments, His statutes, His rules ... to follow the commandments, statutes, and rules their fellow creatures dreamed up ... thinking they knew better than their Creator what they needed to be happy and fulfilled. Ultimately, after turning away from the one, true God toward the many false gods in their midst, God's people were conquered and taken away from the land God promised them. They perished. They did not live long in the land God gave them to possess.

Though they turned away from God, God Himself never turned away from them. As a loving Father of lost children, He continued reaching out to His people. Through His prophets He warned and begged them to turn away from evil and return to Him. But they, for the most part, refused to listen ... continuing to rely on their own ways ... their own means to save themselves. They developed religious systems which seemed to meet the basic intent of what God asked of them, but in God's eyes was far from it.

God the Father eventually sent His Son Jesus, the Word made flesh, to rescue His people from their own poor choices. Throughout His ministry, Jesus, the Son of God, spoke on God's Word with authority ... revealing the fullness of His Father's intentions for His people ... not just the Jews of 1st century Palestine, but for all people – everywhere and across all time, including today. As Jesus continued His Sermon on the Mount, He spoke to His disciples, men and women who believed in Him, who trusted Him ... people like you and me here today ...

people He calls “blessed ... salt of the earth ... lights of the world.” And as blessed people ... as salt of the earth ... as lights of the world ... we are to season the earth and shine our light in the world by living as God calls His children to live. We are to “choose life” by keeping the commandments ... the statutes ... the rules God has laid out for His creatures in His Word.

The problem in Jesus’ day is still a problem for many in the world today. People see the commandments and say, *“I’m good. I’m doing that. I’ve never murdered anyone. I’ve never committed adultery. I’ve never lied ... at least not in a big way.”* Jesus tells us there’s more to His Father’s commandments than the basics people seem to think about. He warns us the path to “the big sins” starts with “smaller ones.” Jesus’ brother James reminds us all, **(James 1:14-15)** *“But each person is tempted when he is lured and enticed by his own desire. Then desire when it has conceived gives birth to sin, and sin when it is fully grown brings forth death.”*

Using some examples in His famous sermon, Jesus confirms James’ inspired writing, telling us in essence, *“Murder ... sure, it’s the unjust taking of a life ... but it’s much more. It’s the choices one makes that can lead one down the slippery slope to taking that life.”* Jesus says, **(Matthew 5:22)** *“But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire.”* Murder is just the end of the slippery slope that begins with the choice to remain angry and hateful. When the sins of anger and hatred between neighbors aren’t nipped in the bud with forgiveness and reconciliation ... they can become full grown murder.

The slippery slope of adultery ... sure it ends when people engage in sexual intercourse outside God’s gift of marriage, found in His Word, between a man and woman. But Jesus tells us, the slippery slope of adultery begins in the heart and mind with thoughts and desires. Despite the world’s belief that “I can do what I want to make myself feel good as long as nobody gets

hurt along the way,” Jesus tells us, “*No, that’s not what your Creator wants for you.*” He says, **(Matthew 5:28)** “*Everyone who looks at a woman (or a man) with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her (or him) in his (or her) heart.*” Choosing to look at pornographic material, watch sexually explicit entertainment, listen to sexually immoral music and speech ... these are all sinful choices that can lead down the slippery slope toward full grown adultery.

God our Father knows the ultimate consequences of our choices are either “life” or “death.” Loving us so much that He not only gives us life in this world, and He offers eternal life with Him, He pleads with us, **(Deuteronomy 30:19)** “*Choose life, that you and your offspring may live.*” That’s only possible if we can somehow keep from turning away from God and His command, statutes, and rules. Try as we might on our own, God’s word tells, **(Romans 3:23)** “*All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.*” None of us can choose the life God desires us to have. However, through Jesus’ perfect life, His suffering, sacrificial death on the cross, and resurrection to new life, God’s word also promises, **(1 John 1:9)** “*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*” Trusting God and His Word, we have confessed our sins ... He has forgiven us. By faith in Jesus, through the power of the Holy Spirit, our Father forgives us completely ... for the times we’ve chosen to be angry and filled with hate, for the times we’ve chosen lust for sexual fulfillment outside of marriage, for the times we’ve chosen to break our oaths ... marriage, legal, business, or other vows, and for any sin ... whether we know it ... or whether we’re clueless to it. We cannot do anything to overcome our choice of death and evil ... but God, through His mercy and grace, for all who believe in His Son Jesus ... erases our failures. He prepares us each day for the day we’ll each enter the eternal Promised Land, the new creation, the Kingdom of heaven.

The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you. Amen.

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