

## "Choose Life"

A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Scott Herr  
First Presbyterian, New Canaan, CT – February 12, 2023

Please Read:  
Deuteronomy 30:15-20  
Matthew 5:21-37

In today's Deuteronomy text, Moses exhorts the people, "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life..." It's black and white, and about blessings and curses. Obey the commandments and you will receive the blessings of life. Ignore them, and you will experience curses.

It sounds so simple, doesn't it? Just figure out the rules and follow them, and all will go well. It's a clear stream of theology in the Scriptures. Whether on a personal level, or as a nation, throughout Israel's history of Kings and the prophets, this ethic is dominant. And there is some truth to this worldview. Be obedient, follow the rules, and it often does go well for you, at least you stay out of trouble. If you break the rules and rebel against God's law, you can find yourself in a world of hurt.

But, I think we all would agree, it's a little more complicated than that... Reading through the long list of blessings and curses that quite practically illustrate the choices between life and death, happiness and sorrow, one realizes that this Deuteronomistic theology, which has had such tremendous influence throughout the biblical traditions, and still today shapes many believers' views regarding sin and suffering, might do more harm than good. It's summed up in one word: "legalism." Paul said it this way, "the letter kills, the spirit gives life."

Part of the problem is how to discern what God is really commanding... Now this is really important. Jesus does not *replace* the law, but he is inviting us to *reinterpret* the law. Tomorrow I'm having coffee with Rabbi Jay Telrav, and he would remind us that this text from the Torah is known as the "Nitzavim," Israel *standing* before God. It's about how to live in the presence of God... It's about choosing from the heart, mindful of God's divine love and justice.

I think Jesus is not abolishing the law but calling us back to the heart of the law, the spirit of the law. A helpful guide in interpreting the law might be: *If your obedience to your understanding of God's law doesn't lead you to a greater love of God and a greater love of your neighbor, then it's wrong.* This is called a hermeneutical lens, the paradigm through which we interpret scripture. Simply put, Jesus' hermeneutical lens is *divine love and justice.*

For Jesus, to choose life means always to choose self-giving love, the way of compassion and mercy. Paradoxically, sometimes that means interpreting parts of the law in a new way that looks like you are ignoring it...

"Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" the scribes and Pharisees asked Jesus' disciples (9:9-13). A clear violation of Torah. "I haven't come for you good people," replied Jesus, "I've come to seek and to save the bad..." "Your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath!" (12:1-14). "The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath," Jesus said... "Master, heal my daughter," pleaded the Canaanite woman. "Well, I'm really supposed to only go to the House of Israel," said Jesus, "but what the heck?" (15:21ff) He heals her... "Rabbi, Moses said a man could get out of marriage by giving his wife a certificate of divorce." "It was a stupid law made for stubborn people," said Jesus (19:3-9). In the sociological reality of Jesus' day, to divorce a woman almost always drove her into poverty and prostitution. Stay married and show mercy was the idea for Jesus. Today because of mercy and compassion we reinterpret the laws on divorce to give people freedom from an abusive or life-draining marriage.

The questions should always be: What will lead to a deeper love of God and deeper love of neighbor? What is the most compassionate merciful way forward? "You have heard it said of old... but I say to you..." ... *That's our Jesus.*

It is possible to choose so much of life the way you think God wants it that you are so good, so right, you are wrong! You can be so religious, that you miss the point of religion. Dry, dead, jot and tittle legalism can suck the life out of religion until it is cold, calculating, and ugly. Mark Twain once described someone as "a good man in the very worst sense of the word."

But, you know, there is a risk with today's gospel. Learning that sometimes a rule must be broken, do we live as though anything goes? In a fight between legalistic scribes and Pharisees, on the one hand, and rule breaking harlots and tax collectors on the other, you know whose side we're on!

Big deal that Jesus abrogates religious laws about how we keep the Sabbath holy, how we prepare ourselves for worship, the sort of company we keep, the sanctity of marriage -- we never wanted to keep those anyway!

But then he throws at us, "Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven..."

Go through the whole sermon on the mount. Jesus takes an older command, difficult enough to keep even for a scribe or a Pharisee, and he intensifies the command. "You

know you are forbidden to murder your brother. I forbid you even to be angry with your brother. Call him a fool, you'll go to hell" (5:21-22). "You know that adultery is a no-no. I say, look at another person lustfully, and you've committed adultery of the heart" (5:27-28). "If your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off" (5:29-30). "Someone hits you on the right cheek, offer them your left as well" (5:38-42). Love your neighbor, invade your enemy? I say, love your enemy, pray for those who persecute you. Do not lay up treasure for yourself on earth. Judge not, lest you be judged. Enter by the narrow gate" (5:43-45). No wonder when Jesus got finished, "the crowds were astonished at his teaching!" (7:28).

Choosing life for the people of faith for centuries meant choosing to play by God's rules, to take seriously the commands which God gave to his people, to be obedient to the Lord. This was the way of life. And for Jesus, when it came to really living into the fullness of the law, his advice was not just to keep the law like the Pharisees and scribes, but get back to the heart of the law!

This sermon on the Mount stands as a guardian against every immoral or antinomian misunderstanding of the gospel. Here we encounter the bracing unsentimentality of Matthew's moral gospel. Here he challenges us to be good, really good, if we would be God's people. And all of our sweet Jesus sentimentality and gushy grace just gets burned away by these searing commands. We are, as Matthew says, left astonished.

John Calvin spoke of three uses of the law: First, God's laws show us God's righteousness and justice, by which we will learn humility. Go out tomorrow and try to live lovingly, truthfully, nonviolently; you will be humbled and know your need of God. Second, God's law is meant to restrain evil. The law is a hedge against the chaos of lawlessness. Remember that every time you're driving a car and imagine what it would be like with no little lines down the middle of the road ... Third, the law is like a dance card inviting us into a relationship with God. It's our purpose in life: "to glorify God and enjoy God forever." The law guides us on how to live into our purpose.

Fortunately, God demands excessive things of us, but is always there for us with excessive forgiveness and grace. Luther says that's why Jesus begins his Sermon with, "Blessed are the poor in spirit" (5:3), because even if you felt rather rich in spirit when we began this sermon, by the time Jesus gets done with demonstrating your lust, violence, covetousness, and sin, everybody looks poor, thus rendering you into exactly the sort of person Jesus loves to love.

In the end, we choose life, not through mere mastery of ritual obedience or skillful reinterpretation, but through relationship with God by grace through faith. Jesus gives us the spirit who both guides us and gives us the resources to fulfill Christ's law of love and freedom for life. C. S. Lewis in his book the *Great Divorce*, writes, "There is

but one good; that is God. Everything else is good when it looks to God and bad when it turns from God.”

*Chariots of Fire* is a movie about the true story of Eric Liddell, a man of deep faith who won the gold medal in the 1924 Olympics. In a scene with his sister Jenny, Liddell tells her he’s decided to go to China as a missionary. Jenny is thrilled, until Liddell tells her, “But I have a lot of running to do first.”

Jenny’s upset, because she thinks her brother is neglecting his duties before God. Liddell responds gently but confidently: “I believe that God made me for a purpose. For China. But He also made me fast, and when I run, I feel God’s pleasure. To give that up would be to hold God in contempt.”

Eric did go on to serve in China and died in a Japanese concentration camp. What you may not know is that for 45 years Liddell’s grave lay unknown; then it was moved to the Mausoleum of Martyrs southwest of Beijing to the last resting place of those considered to have given their lives for China. Few foreigners, and even fewer Christians, have been accorded such an honor in Communist China.<sup>1</sup>

Choosing life, paradoxically, may mean giving your life away for something great than your personal security or happiness. Choosing life will probably always mean giving life to others...

One last thought: At the very end of Matthew's gospel, Jesus tells us to baptize and teach the world "all that I have commanded you." All, even the bit about turning the other cheek, giving away all that you have, loving your enemies... yes, all... Then comes the punch line that makes the fulfillment of the commands possible and the burden of the law bearable: "Lo, I am with you always - even to the end of the age..."

*In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.*

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<sup>1</sup> Referenced online February 11, 2023: [http://www.stmungos.freeuk.com/liddell\\_1006.html](http://www.stmungos.freeuk.com/liddell_1006.html)