

“YOUR CHOICE! WHAT WILL IT BE?”
Deuteronomy 30:15-20, Psalm 119:1-8, Matthew 5:21-37
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J. Douglas Burford, of Mission, Kansas, gives this interesting testimonial. He says: “During my college years—in my infinite wisdom—it occurred to me that it made no sense to stop at red traffic lights when there was clearly no traffic around. So I began to stop only briefly—just long enough to check for cars—and then proceed. My stops became shorter and shorter, and eventually I no longer stopped at all. I simply checked out the landscape well in advance and—if no cars were coming—proceeded full speed through the red light.

“One day something changed all of that, and I’ve never run a red light since. I was approaching an isolated light in an area where there was rarely traffic in the busiest of times. I had already checked out the landscape and was near the empty intersection when a car topped the hill to my left. It was too far away to pose any threat, but it did pose a problem: it was a police car. But that is not what changed my ways, because I got the car stopped and received no more punishment than a dirty glance.

“What scared me enough to put an end to that practice was what occurred in the split seconds between spotting the patrol car and getting the car stopped. In that instant, my foot moved from the gas pedal to the brake pedal, and then back to the gas pedal! I did not will it to do that; my foot just did it. My foot did that because that is how I had trained my mind to respond (it’s called muscle memory). I had continually ignored what had once been a clear signal to stop—a red light—and as a result that signal was no longer clear.

“The same occurs with sin. Our God-given conscience gives us warning signals, and we can heed those signals or ignore them. If we ignore them often enough, we may eventually fail to recognize them as signals at all.”¹ And then we develop life patterns that are opposed to the will of God. And, of course, we will suffer the consequences of those life patterns unless changes are made and we are brought back into the ways of the Lord our God.

¹ (PreachingToday.com, *Perfect Illustrations*, [Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2002] pg. 256)

We heard a similar warning in our Old Testament lesson today from Deuteronomy 30. Moses was giving the nation of Israel final instructions before they crossed into the “Promised Land.” He gives them the warning that if they “*walk in obedience to [the Lord], and ...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. **BUT** 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*” (30:16-18). This warning is for us, too, even today.

You see, the people of Israel had seen the glorious work of the Lord. They were able to remember the work done in Egypt to enable their rescue by God from their slavery. That was the purpose of the Passover Celebration, to remind them. They were able to remember the miraculous provision of the Lord of food and water throughout their travels through the wilderness and desert regions. Other sacred festivals were for that purpose to remind them. They were also able to remember their failures in following the Lord’s commands, and the consequences that came with that disobedience. God wanted them to remember all that He had done for them so that they would remain faithful to Him in their own lives and trust in His ways for the future occupation of the “Promised Land.”

God had promised to deliver them into a “*land flowing with milk and honey*” (Numbers 13:27), even to defeat the peoples living in that land. Yet He demanded their faithfulness to Him. If the people would remain faithful to God, He would go with them and provide for them and protect them. But if they were going to forget all that God had done, and desire the ways and land of Egypt instead, or fall in love with one of the foreign gods of the people they were about to remove from the land, God would not go with them, or guide them, or offer His protection to them. They would be on their own.

Our God is a jealous God and wants us to worship only Him. And when we get sidetracked, or backslide to our dreams of Egypt living, or begin to worship other gods, The Lord God Almighty doesn’t take too kindly to it. He lets us go our own way, but without His backing or support. And the

consequences of our leaving God and worshipping other entities as our god is disastrous. They always lead us into destruction. God desires our complete loyalty to Him and to none other.

And so Moses lays it out before the people. *“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...”* (Deut. 30:19-20). He encourages them to be faithful to the Lord and follow all of His commands so that they will not have to face the awful consequences that come from disobedience.

Being the people of God so many years later, we have that same choice to choose, not only what our today looks like, but what our tomorrow and next year and the next generations look like, all depending upon whom we choose to follow. If we choose God, we will have life; but if we choose other things in this world as our gods, we will have hardship, disappointments, and failures that will bring us to destruction. The choice is ours!

Psalm 119 gives us the results of obedient living according to God’s laws. The longest chapter in the Bible begins with these great statements, *“Blessed are those whose ways are blameless, who walk according to the law of the Lord. Bless are those who keep His statutes and seek Him with all their heart - they do no wrong but follow His ways”* (119:1-3). Here’s what we can expect when we choose following the guidelines, the commands, the laws and the statutes of the Lord God Almighty -
BLESSINGS!

And how does that happen? David continues, *“How can a young person stay on the path of purity? [That question goes for a person of any age, by the way.] By living according to Your Word...I have hidden Your word in my heart that I might not sin against You. Praise be to You, Lord; teach me your decrees”* (119:9, 11-12). David tells us that THAT is the ONLY WAY that we will find blessing and provision and protection in our lives - by following God’s ways. But again, the choice is ours. Each one of us makes the choice as to which way we will go - toward the Lord, or away from the Lord.

And that goes as we consider all of God's laws and commandments. We are invited to follow the Lord our God, obeying His guidelines so that we can have life in them. It's not just one or two of God's commands that we are to follow - it's all of His laws and commands that we are to follow.

And that brings us to our Gospel lesson for today, Matthew 5:21-37. Listen to how Jesus relates to these laws of God. (READ Matthew 5:21-37).

Now, these four categories are all heart conditions. That means that the decision whether to participate in these activities or not all proceeds from the heart of the individual. God has laws and commandments dealing with these, but ultimately they become a heart decision as to if we will decide to break these commands.

Jesus first addresses murder. The sixth commandment given to Moses on Mt. Sinai says clearly, "*You shall not commit murder*" (Exodus 20:13). But murder rarely just happens. Murder is the action that proceeds out of the heart when a person begins to hate another. The action of killing another begins when the heart no longer shows love for that other person, and the hate drives them into taking another's life. So Jesus says that murder goes way deeper than the actual action. "*Anyone who is angry with a brother or sister,*" Jesus says, "*is subject to judgment*" (Matt. 5:22). Murder begins with anger at our brother or sister, and that anger burns into hatred and that hatred is lived out by the action of murder.

But look closely at what Jesus is really saying to us. He says, "*Anyone who says to a brother or sister, 'Raca,' is answerable to the court*" (Matt. 5:22). What in the world does "Raca" mean? Well, it is an Aramaic word that shows utter contempt, signifying empty, intellectually rather than morally, empty-headed. Today its kin in English would be calling someone a "stupid idiot." It means that we consider that person to be extremely incompetent or a foolish person with less than a three-year-old intelligence. While at that moment we may feel like that person we're upset with is incompetent, calling the other person a stupid idiot is the very beginning of growing hate within you and if not resolved or repented of, could lead us to murder. In fact, Jesus tells us that by simply calling that person a stupid idiot is equal to committing murder against them, and that would bring us into judgment. How many of

us are guilty of murder if Jesus' description of murder takes us into our hearts? Yep, I know, it makes you think carefully what you do when you're upset with a person.

And likewise, Jesus says that by calling a person a "fool" is "*in danger of the fires of hell.*" You see, Jesus understands that we always go where our hearts lead us, and if we're so angry with another person that we could call them a fool or a stupid idiot, we're right on the brink of letting that hatred become fulfilled in the action of murder. So what we think in our hearts are what we will be judged by.

In my life there have been a few people that I've been so angry with that I could easily have killed them. And had that person been in the right place at the right time, because of my anger, I just might have murdered them physically. After all, I had already done it mentally and spiritually. It was only one blink of an eye away from the physical act of murdering them.

So Jesus tells us that if we are angry with a person in any way, before we bring our offering before the Lord, before we share in Holy Communion, we need to make amends with that other person and confess our anger and reconcile with them. Unless we do that, it is likely that we will be guilty and could be sentenced for our anger. Watch out what your heart is telling you, and be careful not to let your heart lead you away from the commandment to love one another.

And it's the same way with adultery. It is a heart issue. The seventh of the 10 Commandments is, "*You shall not commit adultery*" (Exodus 20:14). So when there's something in your marriage that is aggravating you, when your needs aren't being met, when everything the other is saying and doing is getting on your nerves, there is a great tendency to go outside of the marriage to find safety, or security, or fulfillment, or satisfaction in the company of another person. Instead of working out the differences with your spouse to find resolution with them and beginning to build intimacy with them again, the temptation is to find what you want in another person. It's so easy to give up and look for another person to meet your needs.

But God commands us to honor our commitment to our spouses, and to do the hard work of working out the differences and striving to bring pleasure and delight back into our marriages. God says

“NO!” to giving up on the other person, but to honor your marriage vows to love them, honor them, and to cherish them in that relationship ONLY!

But again, this is a heart issue. Jesus tells us anyone who looks at another person lustfully has already committed adultery with them in their heart. The heart leads to looking for the satisfaction of yourself with that beautiful woman, or that hansom man, and when our heart lead us, our minds take over and we begin to imagine all kinds of things. Jesus tells us that we’ve already committed adultery, because once the heart leads the mind to begin to wander away from the love of our spouse, it’s only a blink away from physically leaving the one for the other.

So what’s the remedy for adultery? Jesus tells us that it is the eye that is the porthole to the heart, so if it is the eye that leads you away from obeying God’s commands to love your spouse with all your might, we are to pluck out the eye that leads us to sin! If it is the hand that takes us into a sinful practice away from God’s commands, Jesus says remove it! *“It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell,”* Jesus tells us (Matt.5:29-30).

I can tell you today, that if people in this world would take this remedy of Jesus’ to heart, we’d have a lot of blind and handless people. Sexual sin is so rampant today. Pornography for both men and women is a multi-BILLION dollar industry today. Computer sites are readily available for people to satisfy their longing heart’s desires by looking at, talking with, and eventually meeting up with others through the internet and in person. Why do you think there is such a problem with sex trafficking today? God tells us “NO!” but we make the choice to disobey Him and do what we want instead. We want what we want when we want it so our hearts lead us into the direction away from God’s commands. It’s a choice we make in our hearts way before it lands physically. Jesus tells us to gouge it out, cut it off and let God perform open heart surgery on us in order to bring us back in line with His ways.

And that leads us right into Jesus third heart issue - divorce. Anger leads us to murder; lust leads us to adultery; and both of those lead us to divorce. Sexual sin is the leading cause for divorce in our

world today, and with all the abundance of explicit media presenting opportunities for us to look lustfully at others, it quickly leads our hearts away from the spouse we've vowed "to have and to hold from this day forward until death parts us." God commands us to honor the marriage relationship and build into the lives of our spouses, but when our hearts lead us to greater pleasures and more fulfilling relationships in the lives of other people, it's no wonder that there is such a great divorce problem today.

Divorce is a heart issue, and Jesus tells us the ONLY reason for divorce is sexual immorality. So we are to protect our hearts and minds from the garbage that desires to invade our relationships, and to focus solely on the life of the other person. Even if that means that our own needs and desires go unfulfilled, we are to honor our commitment to the one we've given our hearts to in marriage.

You see, in the days of Moses and Jesus, it was common for men to get unhappy with their wives for some reason. And instead of working it out, they took the "easy route" and gave the woman a certificate of divorce. It could have been because of poor cooking skills. It could have been for having a certain medical condition. It may have been the way she combed her hair, or interacted with the kids. It was the husband at that time who could terminate the relationship for any reason. Jesus says that in doing so, that man would be causing the woman to commit adultery.

Jesus also tells us to take care of our heart issue so that we don't disobey God's commands. He tells us to "*Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength...and to love each other as you love yourself*" (Matt. 22:37 & 39). Love in our hearts causes us to do the right thing, because when love is guiding our hearts, it draws us to obeying God's commands.

The forth heart issue that Jesus addresses is the making of vows and oaths. He tells us to be careful what we promise and how we promise one another. It's one thing to make a contract with another person, but we are to be careful of the terms upon which we fulfill our promise.

I had one man promise to do something for me, and he always followed his promise with the words, "From my lips to God's ear." Guess what he's saying - that he will be held accountable by God if he does not fulfill that promise. To this day the promise has not been fulfilled, so what did he call

upon himself? This man promised before God that he would do what he said he was going to do. But since he has not fulfilled that promise, he is in danger of God's complete rejection, because his heart was not right with God in the making of that promise. There is no one higher that he could swear by, yet he has failed to complete that promise. And that will bring condemnation to him unless he repents of it.

Jesus warns us about making a promise based upon an oath or vow on anything greater than ourselves. He says, "*All you need to say is simply 'Yes' or 'No'; anything beyond this comes from the evil one*" (Matt. 5:37).

Jesus calls us to be honest with each other and to let our hearts simply led us to follow the commands of the Lord our God. Then we can say yes or no according to how our hearts lead us, rather than to make great boasts to make us look larger than ourselves, yet become vulnerable to the gates of hell.

It's our choice folks, to follow the laws and commands of the Lord our God, or to disobey them, and fall away from God, and fall under His wrath. Each one of us makes our own choices and those choices determine the direction that our lives will take. If we are faithful to the Lord's commands, He will bless us and walk with us. If we are unfaithful to the Lord's commands, He will likely turn His back upon us and we'll face life on our own, to our own demise. What will it be for you? Let's pray...

Father, there are so many things in this world that easily lead us from You. Yet You have called us to give up on the world's ways and to follow Your Laws and Commands with our whole heart, soul mind and strength out of love for You. Forgive us today for our many sins, disobeying Your commands. Give us the hearts to seek after You in all things and in all ways, so that we might not bring Your wrath upon us, but rather find Your blessings in our lives. Help us to take care of our hearts, to watch out for those misleading influences of our world that call us to abandon Your ways to do things according to our own ways. Give us hearts that are in complete compliance to Your commands, and enable us to help others to do the same. May we all say, "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord" (Joshua 24:15). This we pray in the name of our Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ. AMEN.