

Notes for Children's Talk and Sermon for
Sunday, 29 May

Children's Talk: Freedom and Responsibility

1. Does the Lord want you to be kind or unkind?
2. Are you always kind? Why not?
3. The Lord gives us something called freedom. Freedom means that you are able to do bad things.
4. With freedom comes responsibility. What is responsibility?
5. The Lord also gave the Children of Israel freedom and responsibility. This is what Joshua said to them:
 - a. Joshua 24:14-15
 - b. Now therefore, fear the LORD, serve Him in sincerity and in truth, and put away the gods which your fathers served on the other side of the River and in Egypt. Serve the LORD! And if it seems evil to you to serve the LORD, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD.
6. Do you think the Lord wanted the Children of Israel to serve other Gods? No. But He let them if they wanted to.
7. But Joshua made one thing clear: even though they were able to worship other gods, he and his family were going to worship the Lord no matter what.
8. That is the responsibility that comes with freedom. He knew he could choose evil, but instead he chose what was best for himself and his family.
9. You all have the same choice: good vs. evil
10. The Lord does give you that freedom; but He expects you to use it wisely.

Are You Committed?

A Sermon by Pastor Joel Christian Glenn
29 May 2022

The choices we make have consequences. Some of these consequences are insignificant while others have eternal ramifications. That's the frightening thing about making a hard choice:

- Once I've made it am I stuck with it?
- What if it's the wrong choice?
- Will I like the results of my choice?
- Do I know enough to make an informed choice?

These questions are an important part of making a choice. Yet we may become so caught up in answering them perfectly that we end up making no choice at all. That's a problem; because making no choice is probably the absolute worst choice we can make. So let's take a look at the most important choice we will ever make: the choice between good and evil, and look at what it truly takes to take the plunge and commit yourself to what you have chosen. Our focus today will be on the choice between good and evil, between right and wrong. Trying to choose from among many equally good options presents its own challenges, but we will not go into that today.

So as I mentioned we can't not make choices. Yet when we are faced with a difficult choice it is tempting to make no choice at all. This option is enticing because not making a choice feels safe. It gives us the illusion that we don't have to reject either choice, that we can keep our options open. This dilemma of sitting between two options and choosing neither is well-illustrated in the Word: the King and Queen of Israel, Ahab and Jezebel, had killed off many of the prophets of Jehovah and coerced people into worshipping the false god Baal. The people were then presented with two options: worship Jehovah, the true god, and face death; or worship Baal, the false god, and live. Here's what Elijah the prophet had to say about that:

And Elijah came to all the people, and said, "How long will you falter between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow Him; but if Baal, follow him." But the people answered him not a word. (1 Kings 18:21)

I love the rebuke in Elijah's voice their: "how long will you falter or limp between two opinions? If Jehovah is God, follow Him; but if Baal is god, follow him!" Here's Elijah, a man who has risked his life to worship Jehovah and you can almost hear the disdain he has for these Israelites who can't even get their act together enough to solidly commit to even Baal. They answer not a word to him. You can imagine their dilemma: we know we should worship Jehovah, and we even want to, but we also don't want to be slaughtered by Jezebel for not worshipping Baal. Best to halfheartedly pay lip service to Baal while not really rejecting Jehovah either. We'll do both.

This is probably a familiar spot to find ourselves, for some of us anyway. We want to do the right and good thing; but what of the cost? What's at risk if we do what we know we should? Obviously doing the right thing is easy a lot of the time, maybe even most of the time. That doesn't save us from the fact that other times doing the right thing looks like it will really hurt. In that case, we say to ourselves, better to hold off making a decision. So we don't really commit either way and end up limping between two opinions like the Children of Israel. It's a comfortable place to be.

Without commitment there are no consequences! We could spend eternity trying to make a choice, while the entire world passes us by.

At least, that's what our minds tell us. The Lord has something else to offer. It turns out that not making a choice, especially when it comes to right and wrong, is in itself a choice, and it's one of the absolute worst choices we can make. This is represented in the language of being hot or cold, hot being a symbol for to be filled with love and cold being a symbol for to be empty of love. Here's what the Lord says:

I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth. (Revelation 3:15-16)

Wow. That's pretty intense language just in the literal sense, let alone after we dig in and see how it is speaking to us. The Lord just basically said that if we don't choose between good and evil He is going to vomit us out of His mouth. So if we're like the Children of Israel limping between our options and not making a choice, that is really, really bad for us.

So before we get down to how to make those hard choices I want to spend some time exploring why it just does not work to not make any choice. What it comes down to is that when we are not willing to commit one way or the other we end up mixing good ideas with bad ideas and they corrupt each other. We end up being able to justify anything we say or do and lose any motivation to really change. Here's how that works. I'll read a description of this from the Teachings of the New Church and then we'll look at some real life examples.

No one can stand between God and the devil and, turning his head this way and that, pray to both at the same time. Those who attempt to do so are meant by these words of the Lord:

I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot. I could wish you were cold or hot. So then, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth. Revelation 3:15-16

An officer cannot gallop about with his troop between two armies and take sides with both; nor can anyone intend evil and at the same time good towards the neighbor. For then evil lurks in the good; and although the hidden evil does not appear in the actions themselves, yet it does make itself manifest in many particulars, if one examines them carefully. The Lord says:

No servant can serve two masters ... You cannot serve God and mammon." Luke 16:13

(True Christian Religion 437)

The gist of this passage is that we must make a choice. You cannot possibly turn your head two directions at once. Then it goes a step further, because we feel like we can. We feel like we can have it both ways. Yet when we try, even if we can do something that looks good on the surface, that evil intent is also lurking there underneath, and it will come out one way or another, whether we like it or not. That's the problem with not making a choice.

Let's look at some examples. Say you've had a hard day at work. You come home a little later than usual and are feeling tired. As you greet your family you realize that your wife has had a far more hectic day than you with the kids. So now you're faced with a choice: do you lie down on the couch and ignore the kids or do

you jump in and give your wife a break? You know what's right and you also know what you actually want to do. So instead of choosing, you compromise with yourself so you don't have to make a choice. You'll take it easy and help your wife out with the kids, you'll commiserate, maybe drops some hints you had a hard day at work. Now maybe that is a real choice that you could make and it would be the right thing to do to take care of yourself, your wife, and your kids. But I'll bet that for a lot of people that scenario is one in which you are trying to get away with something. You've convinced yourself you're doing the right thing, and even in the moment believe it. But you also know in your heart that you're doing the wrong thing.

It's like your saying to yourself, "Maybe I can do both. Maybe I can get away with kinda sorta doing the good thing, get credit for having done the right thing, but really I'll still get all the benefit of not actually having done it." So instead of committing to just doing the right thing, and instead of just saying, "to heck with it, I'm tired, I'm going to be lazy even though I shouldn't, and I'll apologize later," you avoid doing the right thing while at the exact same time convincing others, *and even yourself*, that you *have* done the right thing.

See how you haven't committed either way? The deep problem there is that you're really leaving absolutely no room for growth. I mean, if you had said, "I'm going to do the wrong thing, whatever," at least later you could look back, own up to it, make up for it, and try harder next time. But by not committing you're mixing right and wrong so much that you probably don't realize you've done something wrong at all. If you can't admit you have a problem there is no way you'll be able to work on it. That's why the Lord would rather that you just plain made evil choices than that you were lukewarm.

Now obviously that example we used doesn't apply to everyone but the same dynamics apply anytime that we have to make a big choice between right and wrong. It might be at work, with your kids, with your friends, when dealing with government regulation, when you've heard some juicy gossip, whatever. The way you recognize it is that when faced with the choice between right and wrong you'll be wracking your brain thinking something along the lines of, "How can I feel like I've done the right thing but still have all the benefit as if I had done the wrong thing?" If you find yourself thinking that, you're probably avoiding making a real choice and that will not serve you. Make a choice. Even if it's just to do the wrong thing in the moment, at least acknowledge it's wrong and work on it later! Don't just pretend you haven't made a choice so you haven't done anything wrong.

Now it's easy for me to stand up here and say, "Just make a choice!" but we all know it's a lot harder than that. The truth is that whether we choose good or evil, a real commitment is difficult to make. Part of the difficulty is that anytime we choose one thing over another we experience a kind of death: When you choose a career, all of the other potential career paths die off; when you choose to start a family, many opportunities are lost for good; just making a choice about what to do for the weekend means you won't be able to do other things; and when you choose right over wrong, the ease and delight of doing wrong dies a painful death. The reality is that no matter what you choose something you love has to die, whether it be your love of doing what is right or your love of yourself.

It is essential that we be willing to embrace this death. As we have seen, if we do not, we will simply be left losing on both options. When we feel something begin to die we pull back and stop. We want to keep that part of ourselves alive. This does not mean that all of our choices are equal: the Lord offers a powerful teaching that can help us do the right thing. He says,

Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much grain. (John 12:24)

When a grain of wheat is harvested and the remains are left to rot in the earth, that allows more grain to sprout and live. Death allows for new life. The Lord makes this even more clear elsewhere:

I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die. (John 11:25-26)

Even if you die, still you will live. Think again of those choices between right and wrong: if you choose to always do right, will you ever be able to enjoy life again? If you give up your selfish indulgences, will you still be taken care of? If you take the plunge and truly commit to giving up your bad habits entirely, will you be able to cope with what life throws at you? These are the times at which we need immense trust in the Lord. We need that trust that lets us believe than when we let a part of ourselves die, there is new life that will grow in its place.

When we let selfishness die, we can trust that the Lord will give us new life, life that is even more fulfilling and joyful than what we had before. We don't have to know what the outcome will be. We can find relief in knowing that we don't have to falter between two opinions. There is relief in knowing we have chosen rightly regardless of what the outcome might be.

Even though when we choose to do what is right we let something die, we are also choosing true life, true joy, and true pleasure. What we experience as death is actually the first step into life: the death of the natural self gives life to the true spiritual self, whereas the death of the true or spiritual self is eternal death. The Lord makes this clear to us in His urgent call for us to choose right over wrong, or as He puts it, to choose life over death. So let's end with this passage, this compassionate plea from the Lord to make a choice and to choose life:

See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil, in that I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in His ways, and to keep His commandments, His statutes, and His judgments, that you may live and multiply; and the LORD your God will bless you in the land which you go to possess. But if your heart turns away so that you do not hear, and are drawn away, and worship other gods and serve them, I announce to you today that you shall surely perish; you shall not prolong your days in the land which you cross over the Jordan to go in and possess. I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live; that you may love the LORD your God, that you may obey His voice, and that you may cling to Him, for He is your life and the length of your days; and that you may dwell in the land which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give them. (Deuteronomy 30:15-20)

Amen.