



The Right Choice

SERIES: *Turning Point: Start Fresh/Stay the Course*

This morning we're going to talk about choices. Choices are so much a part of our lives that we often make them without even thinking about it. All of us have already made many choices today. We chose to get out of bed. We chose what to eat and what to wear. We chose to come to church and we chose where to sit when we got here. Most of these are pretty easy choices.

But making the right choice is not always as easy as we think. I remember as a kid watching a TV game show called *Let's Make a Deal*. It was a show that was all about choices. The host was a guy named Monty Hall and he would pick someone from the audience and present to them a series of choices. He would give a person \$500 and then he would say you can keep that money or you can choose to have whatever is behind door number one, door number two, or door number three. Sometimes they would choose to give up the money for what was behind one of the doors. And sometimes it worked out good and you got a new car or a trip to Tahiti and sometimes it didn't and you got something totally useless like a pile of old flat tires. It's hard to make choices when we have no idea what we're choosing.

Choices aren't always easy. Yogi Berra once said: "When you come to a fork in the road, take it." That's how we often feel when faced with a tough choice. We're frozen, fearful we'll make the wrong choice only to regret it later. Sometimes we hesitate because we know what this choice will demand from us in terms of time, money or ability. The most difficult choices are the ones in which we know there is a lot at stake; choices with ramifications for the future: schooling and career choices, where we'll live, who we'll marry. Jean-Paul Sartre understood this when he said, "We are our choices."

Our passage this morning sets before us a choice, just as it was placed before the Israelites 3,800 years ago. On the plains of Moab, on the eastern shore of the Jordan River, the Israelites were about to enter the Promised Land. But before they could take possession of it, the Lord reviewed and renewed the covenant with them. The renewal of this covenant is found in chs. 29-30 and at the end of that renewal Moses challenges them with a fundamental choice.

"For this commandment which I command you today is not too difficult for you, nor is it out of reach. It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up to heaven for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?' Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will cross the sea for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?' But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may observe it. See, I have set before you today life

and prosperity, and death and adversity; in that I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in His ways and to keep His commandments and His statutes and His judgments, that you may live and multiply, and that the LORD your God may bless you in the land where you are entering to possess it. But if your heart turns away and you will not obey, but are drawn away and worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall surely perish. You will not prolong your days in the land where you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess it. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants, by loving the LORD your God, by obeying His voice, and by holding fast to Him; for this is your life and the length of your days, that you may live in the land which the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to give them" (Deuteronomy 30:11-20).

I. We're faced with a choice to love and obey God or give our hearts to something else.

You can see here that the choice is between two ways of living. The first option is spelled out in v.16, **"I command you to love the Lord your God, to walk in his ways and keep his commandments..."** The other option is spelled out in the very next verse, **"But if your heart turns away and you will not obey, but are drawn away and worship other gods and serve them."** This is a summary of this entire book: "You're going into this new land and you'll be confronted with a choice: love God, obey God, worship God or follow the gods of the nations around you."

It's really the same choice we're faced with today. We live in a land that's full of idols. An idol is anything in our lives we give ultimate value to; anything we build our lives around; anything we feel we can't live without or be content without. Henry Blackaby says, "An idol is anything you turn to for help when God told you to turn to him for help." Most of our idols are good things that we've turned into ultimate things. We worship things like being in a relationship that provides security and identity; or the success of our children in school or sports; or hanging onto a job that allows us to maintain a certain lifestyle. Idols are things we obsess about; things we get passionate about when a conversation turns in that direction. Even something like family can become an idol. Last year the Barna Group surveyed 1,000 adults; one-third said their family is more important than God. That's taking a good thing and making it an ultimate thing. That's idolatry.

Part of the reason we're this way is God created us as worshippers. If we don't worship him we'll find something else. Simon Tugwell writes, "It is the desire for God which is the most fundamental appetite of all, and it is an appetite we can never eliminate. We may seek to disown it, but it will not go away. If we deny that it is there, we shall in fact only divert it to some other object or range of objects. And that will mean that we invest some creature or creatures with the full burden of our need for God, a burden which no creature can carry."

We think sin is doing bad things; breaking God's rules. But sin is much deeper than that. That's why the emphasis in these verses is on our heart. The choice is whether or not to "love the Lord your God" and whether or not to let your "heart turn away" from him. This is not a skin deep obedience; this is not the choice of a teenager to rake the leaves with an attitude because he knows if he doesn't he won't get to use the car that night. This is a choice that flows out of a deep knowing that this God we're called to love has first loved us; that he's rescued us; that before we can choose him he's chosen us.

II. The right choice is critical.

One thing that's very clear here is that this choice is critical. Moses says the choice is really between life and death; prosperity and adversity; blessing and the curse. There was a sense for the Israelites that this was literally true. Loving God would result in the defeat of their Canaanite enemies, a bountiful harvest, open wombs and long lives. But if they turned away from God their enemies would overtake them, their crops would fail and eventually they would be uprooted and hauled off to another land. And that's exactly what happened to them.

For us "life and death" might look a bit different. When the Bible uses these words it often is talking about spiritual life and death. For example, in the book of Romans Paul is trying to motivate his friends in Rome to choose to serve God rather than sin. He says, "**What benefit did you reap at that time from the things you are now ashamed of? Those things result in death! But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves to God, the benefit you reap leads to holiness, and the result is eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord**" (Rom 6:20-23). Sin results in spiritual death, being cut off from God. Serving God brings holiness and eternal life. This eternal life isn't just for later, after we die; it's for now. He's talking about being spiritually alive...NOW! Having the very life of God within us.

Have you seen those Kaiser Permanente commercials that say, "Live well and thrive." Those are great advertisements because that's what all of us want to do but so often fail to do. Thriving is what life was intended to do. Thriving is what God meant when he said to Adam, "**Be fruitful, and multiply.**" Thriving is what Jesus meant when he said, "**I came that they might have life, and might have it abundantly**" (Jn. 10:10). But why does that elude us? People in the medical profession, especially nurses, use the initials FTT to describe an infant who is unable to gain weight or grow. That stands for "failure to thrive." Why do we so often fail to thrive? Failure to

thrive is the spiritual result of choosing to turn away from God and looking for life in the wrong places.

During the last NFL regular season, quarterback Tom Brady set the record for most touchdown passes in a regular season and won the MVP award. At the age of 30, he's already won three Super Bowls. In 2005, he was interviewed by *60 Minutes* journalist Steve Kroft. Despite the fame and career accomplishments he had achieved already, Brady told Kroft that it felt like something was still lacking in his life: "Why do I have three Super Bowl rings and still think there's something greater out there for me? I mean, maybe a lot of people would say, 'Hey man, this is what it's all about.' I reached my goal, my dream, my life. Me? I think, 'It's got to be more than this.' I mean, this isn't—this can't be—all it's cracked up to be." Kroft pressed Brady as to what the right answer was, and Brady added: "What's the answer? I wish I knew... I love playing football, and I love being quarterback for this team. But at the same time, I think there are a lot of other parts about me that I'm trying to find." I want to write FTT on his forehead.

Tom Brady isn't thriving because at least at the time and from what I can tell he'd chosen death. I am sure he didn't think of it that way. No one thinks of it that way. Who would choose death over life? What usually happens is we get fooled into thinking that someone or something will give us life when in fact it can't deliver. Only God can give us life.

III. The right choice is possible.

I think sometimes deep down we think that following God and doing his will is just too much for us; we just don't have what it takes. But one of the things this passage tells us is not only is this choice critical but it's possible. This is what Moses says up in vv.11-14.

It's possible because it's clear. He says this command "**is not too difficult for you, nor is it out of reach.**" The Hebrew reads: "it is not too wonderful." This term is used of God's cosmic wonders or mysteries that we can't understand. In other words, what God commands isn't so shrouded in mystery that you'll never get what he wants. In ancient religions and new age religions today there is the idea that you can achieve the divine only by means of special knowledge you attain by climbing some kind of ladder to enlightenment. It's like God plays cosmic hide and seek with us and unless we can unveil the esoteric puzzle, we'll be consigned to a lesser life. But Moses says it's not like that. It's not out of reach. God doesn't make attainment of special knowledge a prerequisite for what he has to offer. He doesn't make his commands like a carrot on a stick, always a few inches outside of our grasp. It's not that hard to understand what he wants. In high school, Algebra II was beyond my reach; it was always too difficult. Try as I might, I couldn't see behind the veil of mystery of axioms and theorems. God is far kinder than Algebra II. God makes his will clear and accessible. No need for a Ph.D. in theology to get what God says or years of meditation to break into some higher level of consciousness.

It's also possible because it's near. When people seek the mysteries of the universe, they often go on a long

journey. But Moses says, "It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will go up to heaven for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?' Nor is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will cross the sea for us to get it for us and make us hear it, that we may observe it?'" Since time immemorial, the epic quest for the secrets of the universe has been legendary. In the legend of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, Sir Lancelot searches for the Holy Grail. But this can be a religious thing, too. We say, "Well, I'm on a spiritual quest." Buddhism is all about that quest. It's about the spiritual journey to higher and higher levels of consciousness. It's like in that old TV show, *Kung Fu* It was about this Buddhist monk named Grasshopper. He was a peaceful monk but you didn't want to tick him off because he knew Kung Fu! But Grasshopper just kind of wandered around all day because he was on a spiritual quest but he never really arrived at what he was searching for. Moses says it's not like that with God's commands. You don't have to climb the highest heights or sail the seas to get it.

There is a great verse in chapter 29:29: "**The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law.**" Isn't that great? We don't know everything. There are some things we're not meant to know. But we know enough. All that we need to know to live for God is near.

Moses says it's so near that it's "**in your mouth and in your heart.**" What does that mean? It means it's so near that you can speak it and learn it and internalize it and make it a part of your life. It's as easy as reciting a nursery rhyme you've known since childhood. It's like sometimes you just know in your heart the right thing to do. Deep down you know what the right choice is. That's how it was with the Israelites and that's how it is with us.

But there is still a problem with this. It's wonderful to know that making the right choice is possible because God's commands are both clear and near, but I still have a hard time DOING it. It's like Paul says in Romans 7:22-23, "**For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members.**" In other words, I know what choice to make; I know what I want to do; but I have something else in me fighting against that. That's your story and my story. How do we deal with that?

IV. The right choice is attainable through the person and work of Jesus.

The answer is in this passage as well. But in order to see it, we have to go to the New Testament. In Romans 10 Paul says there are two ways to go about attaining righteousness and salvation. You can try to keep the law or you can simply trust in Christ. The first is salvation through good works; the latter is salvation by faith; the first is all about what we can do; the latter is all about what Christ has done. To prove his point he goes back to this passage in Deuteronomy. Look at Rom 10:6-10.

"But the righteousness based on faith speaks as follows: 'DO NOT SAY IN YOUR HEART, 'WHO

WILL ASCEND INTO HEAVEN?' (that is, to bring Christ down), or 'WHO WILL DESCEND INTO THE ABYSS?' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead).' But what does it say? 'THE WORD IS NEAR YOU, IN YOUR MOUTH AND IN YOUR HEART'-- that is, the word of faith which we are preaching, that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved; for with the heart a person believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation."

Do you see what he's saying? He's saying that making this choice for life isn't all about your ability to keep the law, rather it's about trusting in what Jesus has already done. You can't go up and bring Christ down. You can't attain to those spiritual heights. You can't climb the ladder of moral perfection to bring God down to us. You don't have to. He already came down. That's what Christmas is all about. We call it the incarnation. God came down and was born as a tiny baby and lived as a sinless man among us. But that's not all. Nor can you go down into the abyss and get him and bring him up from the dead. You don't have the power to bring someone up from the dead. But you don't have to. He already rose up. That's what we celebrate at Easter. So we have Christmas and Easter both right here in Deuteronomy. You don't have to go up and bring him down because that happened at Christmas. Nor do you have to go down and bring him up because that happened at Easter.

As a result, the word of faith, the gospel of Jesus is near you. Remember, Moses said, "it is in your mouth and in your heart." Well, Paul takes that and says all that is left for you to do is "confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead." If you do that, he says, "you shall be saved." So the choice is possible not just because it's clear and near but because Christ has done what we could not do.

Looking at this, there are two excuses that are ruled out. We can't look at this choice to follow Christ and say, "I'm just not cut out for this. I could never reach those heights. I could never plumb those depths. You don't know what I've done." God says, "You don't have to. I already did it for you." Nor can you say, "I don't need God's help. I'm a good person. I go to church. I give to the needy. I've been baptized." Paul says, "Don't say that in your heart. It's not enough. You can't do what Christ did. You can't attain those heights. You can't plumb those depths."

CONCLUSION

The one word which I haven't yet commented on yet is found several times in this passage. It's the word "Today." Verse 11, "**For this commandment which I command you today...**" Verse 14, "**See, I have set before you today life and prosperity...**" Verse 16, "**I command you today to love the Lord your God...**" Verse 18, "**I declare to you today...**" You see, one of the problems we have about making the right choice is that we think we can put it off. We think we can say, "You know, I'm a young guy and I'm going to have my fun and then when it's time to get serious I'll live for God." Someone has said, "Delay is the deadliest form of denial."

Satan once called to him the emissaries of hell and said he wanted to send one of them to earth to aid women and men in the ruination of their souls. He asked which one would want to go. One creature came forward and said, "I will go." Satan said, "If I send you, what will you tell the children of men?" He said, "I'll tell the children of men that there is no heaven." Satan said, "They'll not believe you, for there is a bit of heaven in every human heart. In the end everyone knows that right and good must have the victory. You may not go."

Then another came forward, darker and fouler than the first. Satan said, "If I send you, what will you tell the children of men?" He said, "I'll tell them there is no hell." Satan looked at him and said, "Oh no, they'll not believe you, for in every human heart there's a thing called conscience, an inner voice which testifies to the truth that not only will good be triumphant, but that evil will be defeated. You may not go."

Then one last creature came forward, this one from the darkest place of all. Satan said to him, "And if I send you, what will you say to women and men to aid them in the destruction of their souls?" He said, "I will tell them there is no hurry." Satan said, "Go!"

God says, "Today is the day." Some of you are thinking, "I have already made this choice. I chose to follow God a long time ago." But the text still says to you, "Today." God calls you to make this choice every day because every "today" presents us with new challenges in following Jesus. Some of you are riding the fence. You have one foot in the world and the other in trying to follow God. You're living two lives and it's tearing you apart. You're not thriving at all. It's time to make a choice to love and obey God with all your heart. Others of you have never made this choice at all. For you, today is the day for you to say, "yes" to God's offer of salvation in Jesus Christ. The choice is critical. The choice is possible. It's in your mouth and in your heart. It starts not with what you do but trusting in what Christ has done.