

Choices

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time, February 11, 1996. Scripture Lessons: Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 119:1-8; 1 Corinthians 3:1-9; Matthew 5:21-37.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Are we victims or are we choosers? Do we have any choice over the direction our lives take? Or is our destiny controlled by fate? I have little control over many things in my life but nothing has convinced me that I'm only a pawn in a chess game that someone else is playing (Smedes). Many of us are too quick to join the ranks of victims. A victim is has no control over what's happening to them. The excuse, "The devil made me do it", surrenders personal responsibility.

We all know real victims. Real victims are robbed of choices through no fault of their own. Some are victims of sexual abuse. ~~Abusers often convince their victims that there's no escape. - "No~~ one's going to believe you! You need me too much to turn me in! You're too weak to escape!" But sometimes victims do escape. They escape by refusing to believe the lies of their abusers. They choose life. They manage to escape an abusive relationship. They begin to take control of their own lives with the help of others.

In her book *Married People*, Francine Klagsbrun remarks that "People who stay happily married see themselves not as victims, but as free agents who make choices in life" (as quoted in Smedes). Remember Tolstoi's great novel, *Anna Karenina*? Anna commits adultery. Her husband discovers and she becomes a victim of his cruelty. He won't divorce her, nor will he allow her to be happy. She must suffer. She becomes a victim of her husband's cruelty and self righteousness. She ends up feeling that she can't escape.

She has no choice but death. Once a husband or wife feels like they're a victim - that they have no choice - the happiness of their marriage is destroyed. How do we see ourselves? Are we victims or are we choosers?

What about our relationship to God? Are we victims or are we choosers? Are some people condemned to hell by God's eternal decree of reprobation? Does God give us a choice? Listen to the Word of God: "I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity.... Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him."

The Lord was talking to his people as they were about to enter the Promised Land. God had *already* chosen them. God had *already* redeemed them from slavery in Egypt. Now the Lord asks his people, "Will you choose me? Will you love and obey me? If you love and obey me you'll live and prosper. If you turn away from me your lives will become more and more miserable. You'll perish."

By giving his people choices the Lord treated them like adults. The Lord is like a parent who gives his children significant choices. If young people are ever to grow up and become independent they need to be given choices. Parents make nearly every decision for a young child. We don't give a four ^{year} ~~year~~ old the choice of going to Sunday School or staying home; or the choice of brushing their teeth or not. But when they get to be teenagers parents give more choices, more significant choices.

A parent hands the car keys to their teenager on Friday night with fear and trembling. I imagine many a parent paraphrases the

words of the Lord: "Look! You have life and death choices to make tonight. Obey the rules of the road! Go the speed limit! Don't tailgate! Fasten your safety belt! Keep both hands on the steering wheel! If you do, you just may come home alive. But if you ignore the law. If you drink and drive, if you speed, if you tailgate, if you don't wear your seat belts, if you act like a fool you're liable to get yourself killed. Choose life!"

Coming home alive is not a reward for going the speed limit. It's the result of following the rules of the road and making wise and mature decisions. And the long life and prosperity God promises his people aren't rewards for obeying God's commandments. They're the result of following the rules and commandments God has given us to make our lives worthwhile.

And death and adversity aren't punishments for disobeying God. When we reject God's commands, we choose a path that leads to adversity and death. Death and hell are at the end of the road for those who go through life rejecting God and his commands over and over. Remember Albert Speer, Hitler's brilliant architect? He directed the production of weapons in Nazi Germany during World War II. He used slave labor in German munition factories. When he came to the end of the evil road he'd traveled he began to wonder how he could've gone so deeply into Hitler's hell (Smedes). He came up with this answer. Early in his life he chose to join the Nazi youth corp. This bad choice carried him down the ways of death. Bad choices often carry tragic consequences.

But hold on for a minute! We all know kids who obey the rules of the road and get killed on the highways. We all know kids who

disobey all the rules and, mercifully, come home alive. Our puritan ancestors had a tendency to believe *falsely* that prosperity was always a sign of God's approval of their good choices. They often viewed poverty as a sign of rebellion against God. And some of us today presume that most poor people suffer because of sinful choices they've made. We hear people say, "Poor people need to obey God and pull themselves up by their boot straps." We hear some of that in Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay, *Self Reliance*. Emerson said that we only deserve the property we work for. Our primary economic obligation is only to ourselves. He writes, "Do not tell me... of my obligations to put all poor men in good situations. Are they *my* poor?" (*Habits*)

We distort the Word of God when we draw that kind of conclusion from it: when we think our prosperity is the direct result of our hard work and obedience, or when we think our neighbors adversity is always the result of their sinful choices or that we bear no responsibility for others.

But, generally speaking, and everything else being equal, if we obey God's laws, if we use our God given talents, if we work hard, and make good choices we're very likely to prosper and enjoy life so much more than if we make bad choices. The Quakers who came to Pennsylvania 300 years ago are a good illustration. It was said of the Pennsylvania Quakers that they came from England to do good, and ended up doing well (Guinness). And, on the other hand, if we make poor choices, sinful choices, and reject God's commandments, we'll very likely reap the tragic consequences of what we've sown.

Today I've been emphasizing obedience; making wise choices. We Protestant, main line, Christians so strongly emphasize salvation by grace alone that we're often suspicious of any talk about obeying God's commandments. But if we think we can be saved without obeying God's commandments we've accepted what Bonhoeffer calls "cheap grace". Cheap grace is grace without obedience. Cheap grace is salvation from hell without salvation from sin. Cheap grace tells us that we can settle down comfortably with our sins, assured that God will forgive whatever we do.

But God freed ancient Israel from their Egyptian slave masters in order to obey him. God doesn't forgive, accept and love us on condition that we become righteous, but he does forgive us in order that we may choose freely to obey and love God.

The Lord sets before us the choice of life or death today and every day. The choice requires more than a one time decision. The choice involves a whole way of life based on the decision to obey God - listen to his commandments, obey them, love the Lord, and walk in his ways. Every day of our lives we're faced with a momentous choice - will I choose life today or will I choose death.

Before I conclude I want to make two further points.

First, what if we've already made choices so bad that we've brought tragedy and heartache upon ourselves and those we love? We all make bad choices but sometimes our bad choices carry consequences that are especially hard to bear. I'm confident that bad choices need not be fatal. The penitent thief made many bad choices in his life that brought him to the cross. But he made one final good choice that brought him life.

Making bad choices ^{isn't} ~~aren't~~ the worst things that can happen to us. We'll probably have to face the natural consequences of our bad choices. But we can make bad choices worse or better. The most important thing for us to remember when we've made bad choices, sinful choices - is the possibility of being forgiven. No bad choice can get God to love us less than he did when we made good choices. Nothing need ever separate us from the love of God.

And that brings us to the second point I want to make before I conclude. I want to talk briefly about God's choice. If we have choices, God also has a free choice. Our Calvinist ancestors may have made too much of God's predestinating choice, but their emphasis, I'm convinced, was correct. In Christ, God has chosen us so that we may freely choose to love, obey and trust Jesus Christ in life and in death.

At every worship service I hope each of us clearly hears an invitation to respond to the grace of God that comes to us in Jesus Christ. I hope that every worship service confronts each one of us with the imperative: Choose life! Obey God! Follow his commandments! Choose Jesus Christ! Trust Jesus Christ! Follow him!" But when we make that choice we become more and more confident that what matters most is not our choice for Christ but his gracious, free, life giving, predestinating choice of us.

Let us pray: Almighty God, you gave the law to guide our lives. May we never shrink from your commandments, but, as we are taught by your Son Jesus, fulfill the law in perfect love; through Christ our Lord and Master, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.