***CHOOSE CAREFULLY! CHOOSE WELL!***

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Texts: Deuteronomy 30:11-20 and Matthew 5:21-30

Everyday there are a host of emails that come sailing through my inbox with various offers and promotions. But what a deal I found there last week, a deal that seemed too good to be true! I had been specially selected to receive a free radio with free shipping directly to my home! I didn’t have to apply to be specially selected or nominated by anyone else, in their great wisdom they had picked me to receive this fabulous offer! Over a $100 offer – for free! Or so it seemed, until I scrolled down to the fine print at the bottom of the screen that mentioned the monthly subscription fee that would accompany that free radio and the two year minimum term required and the termination fee should I decide that it was not such a great deal after all. The choice seemed obvious – a free radio – but the devil was in the details and that made the choice a lot less enticing.

This text from Deuteronomy poses the same kind of problem: the devil is in the details, but so is God! Moses says to the people, “Today I have set before you life and prosperity, death and adversity. Which do you choose?” Hmm, let’s see: life and prosperity, death and adversity; blessings or curses; heaven or hell – tough choice! Which would you choose? It seems pretty obvious, doesn’t it? Choose life! Who wouldn’t choose the prosperity of life instead of the adversity of death! But before you choose, you might want to read the fine print! The choice offered to the Israelites about life and death had its fair share of fine print.

The life promised by God to the Israelites was prosperity in a new land, a land flowing with milk and honey, a land which lay just across the Jordan River from where they stood, a land toward which they had journeyed for forty years. Moses’ words, “choose life”, were the culmination of a sermon delivered to the Israelites as they prepared to enter that land. The promise of life was the promise of a land of their own in which they would prosper and grow as a people. It was the promise of peace and stability after forty years of wandering in the wilderness and warring with people they met there. It was the fruitful promise of the blessings of God showered on the people and their new land by a faithful God whose promise of land dated back to their ancestor Abraham. The choice for life was the choice for the promises of God to be fulfilled in the long Promised Land.

It sounded wonderful! Choose life! But in the fine print beneath those promises were these conditions:

WHEREAS, God made a promise to your ancestor Abraham and his descendants of which you are a part, and

WHEREAS, the Lord delivered you from bondage in Egypt by the hand of Moses, guiding you through the wilderness and providing for you manna from heaven, and

WHEREAS, the Lord formed you as a people at the foot of Mt. Sinai and handed to you ten commandments to guide your life, and

WHEREAS, the Lord has faithfully brought you to the very edge of that long-promised land despite your repeated disobedience and chronic whining, and

WHEREAS, the Lord is offering to you a glorious life with prosperity and land as God’s chosen people,

NOW THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED: if you choose this life offered to you, you shall

1. Obey the commandments of the Lord
2. Love the Lord your God
3. Walk in the Lord’s ways

If these conditions are violated, if you turn away from the Lord or turn toward other gods or violate the commandments, you will perish and be miserable, not necessarily in that order.

Such was the fine print in those promises of God which Moses encouraged the people to embrace with “Choose life!” The devil was in the details, figuratively and literally. “Choose life!” Moses said. Choose to obey the Lord’s commandments and to love the Lord your God and to walk in the Lord’s ways. It is not too hard for you or beyond your grasp. You will have no excuse on that count! You can do this! You and your descendants can be blessed! Just choose life!

It sounds so simple – choose life, choose to obey, choose to be faithful. But we who have tried to walk that path know how hard it is to practice what we choose and what we preach – obedience, forgiveness, love of neighbors, love of the Lord day after day. We fall short, we sin, we violate all those terms in fine print. That is where grace comes in - the grace of God that loves us through our sin, yet never stops urging us: choose carefully, choose well, choose life and live faithfully. The great 20th century theologian Reinhold Niebuhr has suggested that “life has no meaning except in terms of responsibility.” That responsibility as outlined there on the edge of the Promised Land is to love God, love your neighbor, and obey the Lord your God. Do that – fulfill that responsibility – and you choose life, and in choosing life, you are blessed! Living is not just breathing and batting your eyelids. It is having purpose and meaning – to love and be loved by God and neighbor. To shirk that responsibility is to choose death.

In his book *Wishful Thinking* Frederick Buechner comments on that distinction between life and death and suggests that life is the only true miracle. He writes:

*Have you wept at anything during the past year? Has your heart beat faster at the sight of young beauty? Have you thought seriously about the fact that someday you are going to die? More often than not do you really listen when people are speaking to you instead of just waiting for your turn to speak? Is there anybody you know in whose place, if one of you had to suffer great pain, you would volunteer yourself? If your answer to all or most of these questions is No, the chances are that you’re dead.[[1]](#endnote-1)*

There are some like Bruce Willis in *The Sixth Sense* who are dead and simply don’t know it. They go through life choosing to disobey God, choosing to love themselves and to walk in their own self-determined way, choosing to do what THEY want to do, and so without knowing it, they are choosing death. We do not live to accumulate things. We do not live to make a name for ourselves. We live to fulfill a gracious purpose: to glorify God and enjoy God forever. As Christians that life and purpose are shaped for us by Jesus Christ, who came to shed light on that life which really is life.

That life begins with love of God and neighbor, says Jesus, love that is not only action but also an attitude toward life and living. In the portion of the Sermon on the Mount that we read this morning we hear Jesus say twice, “You have heard it said…but I say…” Jesus makes clear that it is not the letter of the law alone, but also the spirit of the law for which we are accountable. The law may say, “Do not kill”, but we have a responsibility to do more than avoid being murderers; we are to seek reconciliation with those with whom we are angry or in conflict. The law may say, “Do not commit adultery,” but we are to do more than avoid compromising situations; we are to respect and regard others as children of God created in the image of God, not as objects to satisfy our lusty desires or vengeful spirits. Jesus even goes so far as to say that if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out; or if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off; and while those words were never intended to be taken literally (though you might ask your fundamentalist friends who claim the Bible is to be read literally why they have all their body parts) those words are intended to drive home a point – the choices we make have consequences, real consequences, significant consequences, holy consequences! “*The freedom that humans possess is not the freedom to do what we like, but the freedom to do what is right,*”[[2]](#endnote-2) suggests Stephen Carter. We choose! Consciously or unconsciously, day in and day out, we choose! Right or wrong – we choose! Love or hate – we choose! Faithfulness or unfaithfulness – we choose! We choose because God has given us the freedom to choose, and while we might wonder whether that was a good choice on God’s part, God apparently thinks so. So, we choose!

Choose carefully, says Jesus. Choose well. Choose faithfulness! Choose love! Choose life! There is some fine print in there among those choices, fine print calling us to obedience and love of the Lord and our neighbors, but that fine print also offers not just the promise of a reward at the end of life, but the promise of blessings along the way as we strive to be faithful. In seeking to obey God’s commandments, loving the Lord and our neighbors, and walking in God’s ways, we are blessed with life that really is life as God intended it. As Moses told the people of Israel, that blessing, that promise, is well within your reach – if you so choose. What then will you choose? Choose life, for in offering you the choice, God has chosen you! Amen

1. Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, Harper & Row: San Francisco, 1973, p.51 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Stephen L. Carter, *Civility*, Basic Books, 1998, p.78 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)