

Clear Choices

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: Life is full of choices. And I'm not sure why it is, maybe it's because of the nature of our market economy, or perhaps it's because our sense of liberty and autonomy, but we Americans are faced with more choices than most other people on the planet.

This really became apparent to me when I was in the Army stationed in Brazil. One of my first missions was to escort three Brazilian colonels on a weeklong tour of Corps of Engineer projects on the Ohio River right here in the grand ol' USA. My task was to translate for them and help them negotiate the mysteries of American culture. Anyway, early in the adventure we made the mistake of stopping at a Denny's diner for breakfast. Now, you have to understand that in Brazil, breakfast is bread rolls and fruit. That's it. And if you go to a restaurant and order something on the menu, you get what they bring you. Period. You don't get to personalize the order. So, we're sitting at the table. The three guys with me are looking at the seven page breakfast menu lost in utter confusion. So many choices – and nothing resembling anything they'd ever imagined much less eaten. I'm doing my best to explain to them the difference between an omelet and a crepe, and between pancakes, French toast, and waffles in my broken Portuguese, which was none too proficient at that point and to the best of my knowledge lacks the words for what I was trying to describe. About 45 minutes later, after much questioning and explanation, they each decided upon an order. And that's when the real fun began. First guy orders a plate with eggs and toast. He thinks he's done – and he's proud of himself for having ordered it on his own in what passed for English. Then the waitress asks, "How do you want your eggs?" What? He looks at me, lost again. Then he's amazed. You mean there's more than one way to prepare them? Oh yes, many: hardboiled, soft-boiled, poached, shirred, fried over easy, over hard, sunny side up, and scrambled to name but a few. Ten minutes of tedious explanation later, that hurdle is passed. Then comes the next one: what kind of toast? Really, there's an option? Sure: they've got white, wheat, sourdough, rye, multi-grain, English muffin, or biscuit. I'm not kidding: it must have taken us two hours altogether to put the order in.

And the worst of it was that afterward they thought that Denny's was like the magical Mecca of American restaurants. It's where they wanted to have all their meals no matter where we were – and unfortunately for me, there was almost always one close by. So next meal it was how do you want your burger? What kind of potato? Soup or salad? If the former, do you want broccoli cheese, beef vegetable, chicken noodle, or chili? And if the latter, which of eight different salad dressings that you've never heard of do you want? Oh, and my favorite: What? You mean I can order off the breakfast menu during *lunch and supper too*? So, not only do I get to choose *what* to eat, I get to choose *which* meal of the day I'm having? It blew their minds. So many choices. So much to consider. No offense to Denny's, but after that trip it was years before I could bring myself to go back inside one of them.

But this is what I mean when I say we're faced with many choices every day. And to be sure, most of them are fairly inconsequential: in the grand scheme of things it really doesn't matter what you have for breakfast or which pair of socks you decide to wear today. But other choices we must make carry a lot more weight, like what career to pursue, whom to marry, where to invest money, and should I have this looked at by a doctor or should I just keep on hoping it will get better on its own? The choices you make for such matters can seriously affect

your life for better or for worse. And when confronted by such issues, sometimes the best choices to make are pretty clear; but other times they're not.

All of which brings me to today's Old Testament lesson and the choice Moses lays before the children of Israel. Picture the scene: they're on the plains of Moab, just east of the Jordan River. Their forty year sojourn in the desert is coming to its close. At long last they're about to enter the Promised Land – the land flowing with milk and honey that the Lord had promised to give to their forefathers. And you've got to believe that after so long in the hot, dry, dusty desert subsisting on manna and water, to them it looks like paradise: well watered valleys, green pastures, ocean breezes, vineyards and fruit orchards, forests full of trees – not one of them under forty has ever seen or experienced such things. And for those older than that, the last time they'd seen such things they were slaves in Egypt. So the gift God is giving them seems almost too good to be true – but there it is in all its glory right in front of us, ours for the taking.

The question is: how long are we going to keep it? And that depends on the choices we make. Moses sets it before them. On one side is life and good, and on the other is death and evil. On this side blessings, on that side curses. It's a no brainer. The right choice is clear: love the Lord, hear his voice, walk in his ways, keep his statutes and I get to enjoy long life in the Promised Land and the Lord's continued blessing. And my children do too. But if I wander from the Lord and his ways, fail to hear his voice, and turn to other gods – which are no gods at all – then I'll lose my inheritance, I'll be driven out, and I'll perish.

Lest there be any confusion, let me say a few things about the choice here. First, this isn't about choosing to believe in the Lord or about deciding to come to faith in him. Everyone here already believes in the Lord. He leads them in the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. He feeds them with bread from heaven every day. They know and trust the Lord. The choice has to do with whether they will continue to know and trust him and to follow in his ways.

Second, the right choice is doable. I know as Lutherans it's pounded into our heads that we cannot keep the law of God; so all this talk of keeping the Lord's commands, statutes, and rules sounds like an impossibly high hurdle. Not so, because built into the statutes and rules are the means whereby God forgives sin. The law God has given to his people includes instructions for worship, for sacrifices, and for cleansing the people of their sins and trespasses. The Lord knows they're sinners who cannot keep the moral law perfectly. He's made allowances for that and given them the means of grace to be and remain his faithful people despite their sins, weaknesses, and shortcomings. They really can do this.

And third, the choice is made by individuals. When I translated this passage, I rather expected the "you's" Moses mentions to be plural: if you all choose this, then this is what will happen to you all. But that's not the case. The "you's" are singular. Though Moses is addressing the whole nation, he presents each one of them with a personal choice. Each one individually must choose between life and good on one hand and death and evil on the other. No one can choose for you – although it should be said that your choice may and probably will affect your offspring. Those who remain faithful to the Lord will influence their children to do the same. Those who don't will by their example lead their children astray. Each will ultimately make the choice on their own, but like they say, it's usually the case that the apple doesn't fall far from the tree. If you choose death and curses for yourself, then that's most likely what your children will get as well.

Now, all this being said, it's hard to imagine that any of the Israelites would make the wrong choice. I mean, who's going to answer Moses, "I choose death and evil! Bring on God's

curses! That's what I want for me and my children!" Who's going to do that? No one. And on that day when Moses laid the choice before them, not one of them did. The choice was clear, and they all made the right one.

The trouble is that they did not continue to do so. That's where they went wrong. Three times in this short passage, Moses says that the choice is laid before them *today*. When? Today. It's not a one time, make your choice, and it lasts forever sort of thing. No, the choice is laid before you *today*. Every *today*. And usually many times during the day in all the little choices you face. And lots of little choices add up to great big ones.

What happened to the Israelites was this: they crossed the Jordan and occupied the Promised Land, all of them full of faith and good intentions. And almost immediately they began to stray from what the Lord told them. He had told them to eliminate or drive out the idol worshipping Canaanites who lived in the land. The Lord didn't want his people corrupted by their pagan ways. But the Israelites were lazy. As soon as they found a comfortable place to live in the land, they stopped pursuing the conquest. They chose not to do what the Lord asked. Before long they were adopting the practices of their pagan neighbors. Another thing: under no circumstances were they to intermarry with these people. But that rule too soon went by the wayside, and then the pagans weren't just neighbors, they were members of the family. And bit by bit, choice by choice, the Israelites ultimately stopped hearing the voice of the Lord and threw themselves headlong into the worship of the false gods of the Canaanites. Each little choice along the way was clear; they knew what they were supposed to do and chose wrong, with the result that in the end they chose for themselves death and evil. And true to his word, the Lord drove them out of the land and caused them to perish.

These things happened to them as instruction for us to whom the fullness of God's grace has been revealed in Jesus Christ. For we have been delivered not from slavery in Egypt, but from sin, death, and everlasting condemnation by our gracious God who laid upon Jesus the penalty of our sins. It wasn't our choice, either. By God's Word and the power of the Spirit, we've been given faith in Jesus, the faith whereby we are forgiven of our sins and found righteous in God's sight. And we've been gathered together into a holy community, the Church, our Promised Land on this earth, in which we continue to enjoy God's gracious presence, and we hear his voice speaking to us through his Word, strengthening our faith, calling us to ongoing repentance, and daily forgiving our sins by the blood of Jesus. And every day the Lord lays before us the choice: life and good and blessing if you choose to hear his voice and walk in his ways, and death and evil and curses if you choose not to. The choice is always clear.

But we do not always make the right choice. Taking note of Jesus' words in today's Gospel, no Christian sets out to commit murder. But we do in all the little choices we make, choosing to harbor anger against people who offend us, calling them degrading names, failing to forgive them, and doing them a wrong turn if given the opportunity. Thus we murder them in our hearts if not with our hands. And by doing so we choose death rather than life.

No Christian sets out to commit adultery – to be unfaithful to their spouse; but we do in all the little choices we make: imagining romances with others, flirting online, viewing pornography, and allowing our eyes to linger to the point of lust on those we find attractive. And all these little choices allowed to go unchecked and unrepented can lead to full blown infidelity. We know what's right and good; but we choose death and evil.

No Christian sets out to divorce his or her spouse. When we make our wedding vows, we mean it. But we do push toward divorce in all the little choices we make when we speak hurtful words to each other, when we hold grudges and do not forgive, when we do anything

that demonstrates a failure to love, honor, cherish, and thank Almighty God for our spouses. We know the right choice. We choose the wrong one.

No Christian sets out to turn from the Lord. On the day of our Confirmations we took a holy vow to make regular use of the means of grace whereby God makes and keeps us faithful, and we pledged to suffer all, even death, rather than turn from the faith. But we don't do what we promised. We choose otherwise. And we allow every little excuse to keep us from the means of grace: "I'm busy, it takes too long, the kids have their sports, the people at church are all hypocrites, and the pastor is a pompous, boring, jerk. I don't get anything out of it. I'm better off staying at home." By all our little choices: not to attend worship, not to pray, not to hold family devotions, not to daily revisit our Baptisms by repentance, not to attend Sunday school or Bible study – in all such ways we can slowly starve our spirits and end up choosing death over life. And we teach our children to do the same. It is the most foolish and dangerous thing anyone can ever do; and yet each of us can name people we know who have made that choice. It's equally foolish to imagine that it cannot happen to you.

Friends, the choices are clear. Unlike it was for my poor Brazilian colleagues, it's not like we don't know what we're getting into. At each and every decision we know exactly what the Lord commands and how he plans to bless us when we make the right choices. What's more, we can do it. No, we can't stop from sinning entirely. As long as we have the sinful nature clinging to us we will always fall short; but the Lord has given us the means to deal with it through confession and absolution and the Lord's Supper whereby our sins are forgiven, we're restored, our faith is strengthened, and we're given the Holy Spirit to lead and guide us. The right choices are clear and we can make them. But instead we often play the game of seeing how many bad choices I can make and get away with it. It's a foolish and dangerous game not unlike Russian Roulette. When you play it, you fail to consider that every bad choice does damage to you and likely also to someone else, and that lots of little bad choices can ultimately add up to the worst choice of all: death rather than life.

Do not make that mistake. The choice is clear, and only you can make it. Therefore choose life that you may live, you and your offspring, in time and eternity, through faith in Jesus Christ our Lord to whom be our thanks and praise forever. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!