

Deuteronomy 30:15-20 *See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. 16For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess. 17But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, 18I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. 19This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live 20and that you may love the Lord your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the Lord is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.*

Dear friends in Christ our Savior,

Does it matter how I live? That's a good question to ask. It is tempting to wonder: If Jesus offers forgiveness for every sin and if there isn't any sin that is exempt from Jesus' forgiveness, then what does it matter how I live? I can do what I want, ask God for forgiveness and move forward with the confidence that all is well, right?

That sounds pretty good to us. This is great human logic. If this were true, then there really is no reason to worry about anything. You wouldn't need to be concerned about much. Even better, there would be no boundaries you would have to watch out for or follow in your behavior. You could do whatever you want without limiting yourself in any way. You would be free to indulge your lusts and desires as they came about. You would be free to choose whatever lifestyle you wanted or act in any way which you deemed to be right at the time and have no worry of conscience. You will be just fine. If it's wrong God will forgive you and you don't have to be concerned in any way.

While this might sound good to us and not only be popular but fit into the thinking of the world around us, this is just another one of the devil's lies to lead us astray and away from God. Even though Jesus offers forgiveness for any and every sin, how you live does matter! The choices that you make in life for what you do and how you do it matter. In fact, God through Moses today remind us that these choices we make have eternal implications to them. No, we can't earn salvation nor God's favor because of the choices that we make. But the choices that we make for the way that we live do reflect what is in our heart. God himself is holy and he calls his people to live holy lives as well. God is serious about the way that we live and offers serious warnings for those who live contrary to what he wants. Jesus came into this world to free us from our sin not to free us to go out and sin. Living the holy lives to which God has called us displays our love and thanks to him for the salvation he offers in Jesus. Struggling to put aside our sinful nature and live holy lives gives testimony to the love and faith in our heart. It is from this perspective that God through Moses encourages us: **Choose Wisely.**

Now, for many of you, the very moment I said the word, "choose", your heart skipped a beat. Every Lutheran bone in your body cringed because you have been taught by me and every other Lutheran pastor that you cannot choose to believe in Jesus as your Savior. And you would be right. We confess in Luther's explanation to the Third Article of the Apostles Creed: "I believe that I cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ my Lord or come to him." I made the point of mentioning this with last week's sermon and the same thing holds true for this week's sermon. These words of Moses were not spoken to unbelievers encouraging them to make a decision for God. We can't do that. By nature, we are hostile to God and his enemies. We are born into the world spiritually blind and dead—unable to see God, unable to do anything about it and because we are his enemies unwilling to come to him even if we could see him or do anything to move toward him. Deuteronomy is often considered Moses' last will and testament. These are the final words Moses spoke to the Israelites before God took him to heaven. He isn't asking them to make a decision to follow God and come to faith. He is speaking to people who have already come to know the God of free and faithful grace and who look forward to the promised Messiah who would rescue them from death. He reminded them of the spiritual and eternal life God had freely given to them. He reminded them of the two-sided covenant or agreement God had made with them: "If you will live as my people, then I will be your God. If you choose not to live as my people, then you will be destroyed." As he reminded them of this covenant, he also then encouraged them to recommit themselves to following this covenant and living as God's people. The choice that stood before them as they moved forward in life was a sanctified choice. Out of love for God who had chosen them and promised them rescue eternally through the Messiah, they could follow the path of life and go out and live as his people. Or they could reject God's love by following their own path and living their own ways. This was the sanctified choice before them.

In asking God's people to recommit themselves to follow the Lord after Moses was gone, he reminded them of the blessings God promised to those who followed him as well as the warnings God offered for those who didn't. *16For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in obedience to him, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess. 17But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, 18I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.* To those who showed their love for God by walking in obedience to him and keeping his commands, laws and decrees, God promised they would enjoy blessings and prosperity as well as a long life in the land they were about to possess. But to those who were disobedient to God in the lives they lived, who bowed down and worshipped other gods, and followed their own path, God promised destruction. It was like they were standing at a fork in the road. They couldn't go straight. They had to choose one way or the other. Choose to follow God in how they lived and they could expect life and prosperity. Choose to follow their own path, worship other gods and in so doing reject God, and they could expect death and destruction. You don't get more of a black and white decision than this. The choice before them was literally a life and death decision. You only have two choices: follow one path and you are choosing life; follow the other path and you are choosing death. Choose wisely. It really is that simple.

I don't think we give this much credence to the decisions that we make on a daily basis for how we go about our lives. We certainly don't think about the decisions we regularly have to make as "life and death" decisions. And many of them aren't. What am I going to have for lunch today? Should I stop at the car wash on the way home? Should I wear the brown shoes or the black shoes?

These types of decisions are certainly not in the category of "life and death" spiritual decisions. But many of them are, perhaps way more than we consciously or regularly think about. Think about the decisions you have to make on a daily basis. Are you making those decisions from a heart of faith that seeks to honor and glorify God or are you making choices based on what you think is best without consideration of God? Will you be ethical and honest at work when given a chance to cut a corner or get away with something? Will you honor your spouse and keep your vows? Will I do life God's way or my way? Will I follow my fleshly nature or the Holy Spirit? Am I willing to say no and honor God or indulge my sinful flesh? Will I commit to spiritual growth or spiritual sickness? Will I engage in spiritual disciplines that strengthen and guide me in my walk with God? Will I give into the culture around me or will I stand strong and live for Christ? These are decisions that we face every single day. And the choices we make reflect the heart within. The choices we make in answering these questions will determine the path that we follow in life. The way that we live shows what we believe in our hearts. We need to ask: is this path following what God wants for me or is it following what I want for me and therefore leading me away from my Savior. For this reason, these sanctified choices that we are faced with every day matter for eternity. For this reason they are life and death choices and we are to choose wisely.

Here's the deep subject that stands before us: God has given us a free will. We aren't robots who simply react to commands that are given to us electronically. We aren't animals who cannot reason but can only act on instinct or through repetitive training. As humans, God has given us a soul and he gave us free will. He has given us the ability of intelligent, thoughtful choice which sets us apart from the rest of creation. We can't choose to believe in God nor choose our salvation. But as God's people who have been enlightened by the Holy Spirit, we have the freedom either to live by the Spirit or to reject that and live by our human flesh. This is the choice God lays before us today with the encouragement to Choose wisely. As God's people, we have the sanctified choice to follow God, obey his commands and to live life in the fullness God intended for us or to follow our own hearts and desires, rebel against what God says and face the death that comes with sin. What God wants is for us to give thoughtful consideration to this and make a wise choice as we move forward in the way that we live.

Our other lessons today give us guidance as to what this looks like in our everyday lives. They help us to better understand what it means to live holy in our lives: don't murder, don't hate, forgive others and don't hold grudges or refuse to resolve matters, don't commit adultery, don't divorce, don't swear false oaths and the like. We listen to those other lessons and we see how high Jesus sets the bar for us. God wants us to be holy not just in our acts, but our thoughts as well. Not just our words, but our attitudes are checked by God as well. He not only wants us to follow his will but he wants to want to follow his will. And he doesn't just suggest that these are things we should do or could do to live holy lives. He demands we follow his commands with perfect holiness and threatens punishment to everyone who sins against them.

This is what brings fear to our hearts when we evaluate God's commands and the choices we make in life. Too often we have chosen words and actions that are not pleasing to God in heaven. We've allowed lustful and vengeful thoughts to linger in our heart. We've outright rejected what God wants in favor of doing what pleased our own desires. We don't always see these as choices we make...but they are. We'd rather play the victim and say that we were forced to do that by others around us. But that isn't true. In the end, maybe out of fear of rejection or something similar we chose to do it so that we wouldn't be ostracized. But it is still a choice. We have had kids at school when caught doing something they shouldn't say, "I don't know what happened...the DEVIL made me do it!" My response is: "Cut it out. No he didn't. He didn't make you do anything. He may have tempted and made it look appealing. But in the end this is a conscious choice you made." Sin always is! It is a conscious choice. That's hard to own up to. It's hard to admit: "I made a choice and the choice I made was to sin." It's hard to admit because then we have to admit we deserve the punishment that goes along with sin—God's wrath and punishment in hell. Yet we look at our lives and too often when we stood at that fork in the road, we made the conscious choice of death rather than life. And we deserve God's severe and eternal punishment for that.

Yet the one who demands a holy life of us is the very one who came to this earth to live a holy life for us. Jesus chose to set aside the full use of his divine power and glory and to live on this earth for 33 years. He didn't come here for an extended weekend or a long vacation, but chose to live in our shoes for 33 years. Over that time, when confronted with temptation, he chose every single time to honor his heavenly Father and follow his will and commands. Imagine that! Jesus chose life for you every single time he was confronted with a fork in the road and an opportunity to do otherwise. Think about that kind of love for you! Then he chose willingly to offer that life to the most severe suffering you could possibly imagine and ultimately hell and death itself to rescue you from your sins. That same Jesus who demands you live a holy life offers you his forgiveness. He gives to you his holy life to cover yourself with so that he sees in you the holiness he demands. It doesn't matter what you've done. It doesn't matter how many times you done it. For all the times you have chosen poorly, Jesus says, "I love you and I forgive you." Just imagine that! What a wonder!

It is this wonderful news that leads us to say with the Apostle Paul, "We died to sin...how can we live in it any longer?" (Romans 6:2). Our love and thanks for what Jesus has done for us leads us to want to live the holy lives he asks of us. We want to do what pleases him and display our love for him in the way that we go about our lives. Because we love Jesus and want only to please him, God wants us to ponder deeply the choices we have every day as we stand regularly at that fork in the road. He wants us to make a well thought out, educated choice: life or death? Prosperity or destruction? Will this glorify God and give him thanks for what he has done for me or will this reject God's love and grace and lead me away from him? Your ability to choose wisely in these instances comes only from the Holy Spirit. This is why it is so important that you are regularly and often immersed in God's word to let the Holy Spirit strengthen and guide you to make solid, sanctified choices that honor God and please him.

So, does it matter how you live? In a word...absolutely. May God give us the grace, wisdom and strength both to will and to do what pleases him. Choose Wisely. Amen.