

"CHOSE LIFE"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

The ability to make concise and accurate decisions is one of the secrets of successful living. Those of you who are sports fans will appreciate the story of a college football team whose starting quarterback was injured. The number two quarterback had not even dressed, due to illness. This left only a freshman quarterback who also did their punting but had no game experience as a college quarterback. The coach had to throw him into the game, however. It was the first down, but the ball was resting on their own three yard line. The coach's main thought was to get them away from the goal line so they would have room to punt out of danger. The coach said,

"Son....I want you to hand-off to Jones, our big fullback for the next two plays...let him run into the middle of the line and get us a few yards. Then, I want you to punt".

The young quarterback did as he was instructed. On the first play he handed off to Jones, but almost miraculously Jones found a hole off tackle and ran fifty yards. The young quarterback called the same play again and once more, miracles of miracles, the hole was there again. This time Jones ran forty-five yards. The fans were going crazy. The ball was now on the opponent's two yard line - six short feet from the goal line. Confidently the team quickly lined up and the young quarterback received the snap, dropped back a step or two and punted the football into the stands. As the team came off the field, the coach angrily grabbed the young quarterback and asked,

"What in the world were you thinking about when you called that last play?"

The quarterback answered blankly, "I was thinking what a dumb coach we have!"

DEVELOPMENT

The truth of the matter is that many coaches today do not want their quarterbacks making decisions. I read somewhere recently that there are very few quarterbacks in the NFL today who call their own plays; they are sent in from the bench.

Now obviously we are not here this morning to talk football in preparation for the game later today. But there is an important point here we need to note down regarding our relationship to God. And that is that God has paid us the ultimate compliment. He allows us to make our own decisions. He allows us to call our own plays. When He created us in His own image, this was primary among the characteristics with which He endowed us - the ability to choose. In the Garden of Eden, God gave Adam and Eve everything they needed to sustain their life. But in the middle of the Garden He planted a tree - the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The moment He did that, He provided them with an opportunity to make a choice. They could heed His instructions and live forever in Paradise or they could eat of the forbidden fruit and die.

What an absurd choice, you say. Who would ever choose death over life? Yet people make that choice all the time. Every person in this room is aware of the physical harm that can come from smoking cigarettes. The link between tobacco and lung cancer as well as heart disease, high blood pressure and a host of other diseases is almost indisputable. Why would anyone ever choose to smoke. Why choose death when you can choose life. Yet millions of people do

tinue to go on smoking.

There is not a person in this room who is not aware of the dangers of alcohol and drug abuse....yet, there are people within the sound of my voice who would rather listen to the whisper of the serpent saying, "Why that won't happen to you" than listen to the voice of reason or of God.

Unfortunately, it is not only ourselves whom we sometimes hurt through the misuse of our freedom. There are people who really do treasure their marriages. But they are morally weak. They would not want to hurt their spouses for anything in the world, yet they are playing around with fire... choosing, perhaps, the death of a very precious marriage relationship because of their weakness to resist temptation. Many more examples could be used. Who in the world would choose death over life and yet millions of people one way or the other do so every day!

That was as true three thousand years ago as it is today. It was with great urgency then that Moses called the people of Israel together and issued this plea,

"I call heaven and earth to witness against you that today
I have set before you life or death, blessing or curse.
Oh, but that you would choose life..."

GOD HAS GIVEN US THE FREEDOM TO CHOSE OUR OWN DESTINIES

One of the keys
to successful

Christian living is the realization that God has given us the freedom to choose our own destinies.

A social worker tells of knocking at the door of a pitiful house. A woman opened the door a crack, put her foot against it and said through the opening,

"You needn't come in here. Me and my husband don't
take no interest in nothin'!...."

What a pitiful description of persons who have given up control of their lives!

William Willimon tells of seeing a movie years ago in which one of the leading players lived a tragic life, careening from one disaster to the next, never able to hold a job or support a family or keep friends. He finally dies in a tavern brawl. At his death, one of the men who had tried in vain to befriend him and help him put his life in order said:

"Joe died almost like he was born. He came into this
world kicking and screaming and fighting and understanding
nothin'! And he went out of this world fighting without
the slightest notion of what he was put here for or where
he was going."

A pitiful record of another life out of control.

God has given us the ability to take control of our own lives. We can choose our own destinies. Every study of great leaders has emphasized their decisiveness. They know where they are going and they make the necessary

decisions in order to get there. A recent cartoon in a paper that caught my eye put it this way. It showed a picture of a down and out person huddled on the steps going down into the subway. Beside the person is a large sign that read, "Keeping my options open. Thank you". It would be nice to go through life always with our options open, but somewhere along the way we have to make some choices.

You may remember Uncle Remus' delightful story about Brer Rabbit. Brer Rabbit was invited to dinner on the same evening at the same hour to Brer Terrapin's and Brer Possum's. And there he stood...hungrily...at the cross-roads...."Do I eat with Brer Terrapin or do I eat with Brer Possum?" First, he ran down the road toward Brer Possum's. Then, changing his mind, he reversed himself and started toward Brer Terrapin's. Then he changed his mind again and started towards Brer Possums. With the thought of two meals awaiting him, he ran back and forth...back and forth...unable to make a decision until finally he missed dinner at both places.

There are many persons who live their lives like Brer Rabbit. There is no firm destination for their lives - no vital commitment - no beckoning call. In the words of Elijah, "How long will you limp between two opinions?" (Kings 18:21). On, in the words of Joshua, "If you be unwilling to serve Jehovah, choose ye this day whom ye will serve..." One of the keys to successful living is the realization that God has given us the freedom to choose our own destinies.

AND WE HAVE TO LIVE WITH THE CONSEQUENCES OF OUR DECISIONS

You may know the story of a social worker who took real interest in a young boy with severe birth defects. She arranged for financial and medical help. Surgeons were brought in to restore facial features. Therapists taught the young man to speak and to walk. By his teen-years he was able to function as a normal young man in all of the activities of his peers. Where do you think this young man ended up? Unfortunately, he ended up in prison...serving a life sentence for murder. As the social worker explained it, "We taught him how to walk, but not where to walk". The social worker and the surgeons could open up a new world of opportunity for this young man, but they could not protect him from the consequences of his mis-deeds.

And so it is with each of us. If we abuse the freedom we have, we pay the price. I like the story of a man who had been caught driving 40 miles per hour in a school zone. He was fined \$100. The clerk offered him a receipt when he paid his fine. "Why would I want a receipt for a traffic violation" asked the man. "Oh" said the clerk, "With four of these you get a bicycle to ride".

So many of the trials and tribulations of life are the result of bad decisions, unworthy actions, dishonest motives and means. And there is a price to be paid. A young boy was quite disobedient. His father wanted to impress upon him the seriousness of his disobedience. Each time the boy did something that was wrong, his father had him drive a nail into a post. Each day that he did well, however, he was allowed to remove a nail from the post. As he grew older, the boy's good days exceeded his bad and soon the post had no more nails in it. However, the young man noticed one day that the holes in the post were still there where the nails had once been. The deeds had been forgotten, but the scars remained.

God forgives us for our misdeeds, but God does not suspend the Law of Consequences. What we sow, we reap. We have the freedom to choose, but with that freedom goes the responsibility to choose life and not death.

ONE CHOICE THAT SUPERCEDES ALL OTHERS

This brings us then to the final thing that needs to be said. There is one choice that supercedes all others. When Moses instructed the children of Israel to choose life, he was impressing upon them that they should obey the commandments of God. To obey the commandments was life. He did not call them the Ten Suggestions. You and I have discovered something even more vital than the Ten Commandments. We have discovered the Christ. Said Jesus, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life". (John 14: 6)

And to choose Jesus is to choose life. Don Bramlett knows that. Don's a big, burly football star at Carson-Newman College in Jefferson City down in Tennessee. But Don Bramlett's father, John, was a study in undisciplined living. He was also a star athlete. John Bramlett was once known as the "Meanest Man" in the National Football League. A free agent who became a starting line-backer for the Denver Broncos in 1965, Bramlett was runner up to Joe Namath for Rookie of the Year honors. He played in two Pro Bowls and in 1970 was voted Most Valuable Player for the New England Patriots.

Off the field, however, his life was a mess. His family never knew when he left home whether he would come home drunk or call from a jail, or not even come home at all...because he was often involved in fights in bars. One day some visitors came by the Bramlett home. They wanted to talk to John Bramlett... to talk to him about Christ. The impact of that visit changed John Bramlett's life forever. Suddenly he turned from pursuing death to pursuing life. And this is what repentance is about...the exercise of our freedom to decide, by God's grace, for those things that are of lasting and eternal value. John Bramlett made that choice and today his life is a living testimony to the change that Christ can make in the life of a believer.

But perhaps Bramlett's greatest testimony, however, is his son, Don. Don still has a Christmas letter that he apparently penned in an elementary school class room many years ago. The subject was "All I Want for Christmas Is..." Let me read you what Don Bramlett wrote,

"All I want for Christmas is for my family and me to have a very merry Christmas like the other two Christmases we've had. My dad was out drinking and fighting three years ago and we were all worrying about him and wondering when he would come back.

While opening our presents, we were so miserable through those years. Now we have a happy and merry Christmas after my daddy accepted Jesus in his heart and we have a lot to be thankful for. This is all I want for Christmas and I've got it."

Don Bramlett got all he wanted for Christmas. His daddy was a changed man. Said Moses, "I have set before you life and death. Oh, but that you would choose life". Don Bramlett is not the only person ever to offer a Christmas wish on behalf of a father, or a spouse, or a young person. It is an urgent plea that comes straight from the heart of God. Choose life. Choose Christ. Who knows?

Perhaps there is some person present this morning who needs to hear this...to know it's never too late...that the least important thing in life is the score at half time. Choose life. Yes, choose Christ. In the words of scripture, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER: January 22, 1989

O GOD, OUR FATHER - in the mystery and the wonder of worship, we would draw near to You. Make us sensitive to Your spirit and to Your nearness in these moments of prayer.

ENFOLD us with Your loving care.

SPEAK to each of us the word that we need to hear, that special word that will lift us and make a difference in our lives.

MAY WE FIND in every act of our worship - in the sounds of the organ, the singing of the hymns, the anthems of the choir, the reading of the Scripture, the preaching of Your word, - in all of these may we feel that deep and abiding assurance of Your Eternal and Abiding Truth.

THOU GOD OF COMFORT, be near to those who may be feeling the burden of age, the pain of illness, the lure of temptation, the anguish of indecision, the inner turmoil of uncertainty.

WORK through nurses and physicians, social workers and teachers, counsellors and psychiatrists, writers and lawyers, public servants and government officials...all who influence others for good to bring hope and healing, peace and justice to our life together in this land.

OUR PRAYERS this day reach out to include loved ones from whom we are separated by distance, but from whom we are not separated by love and concern.

WE PRAY FOR each other...for those sitting near us in the pews this morning - those to our left, those to our right.

Grant that that person may be blessed with inner peace and tranquility, with that perspective of "higher ground" that worship can provide.

LORD, GOD - FATHER OF US ALL...we pray that the influence of another Sunday may be strong in our land, and that all who worship You this day may be given strong hearts to bear their burdens, willing hearts to bear the burdens of others.

DIRECT US in our worship. Enrich and purify our lives. Forgive us our sins. And make us ready for an adventure with Christ in a world that needs to hear His Word and to follow His way. In His name and spirit we pray.

(choral Amen)

Here is the Sunday School
 presentation for January 22, 1989.
 (all verses)

**+34 They'll Know We Are Christians
 By Our Love**

Words and Music by
 Peter Scholtes



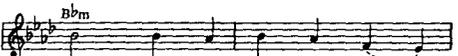
1. We are one in the Spir - it, We are
2. We will walk with each oth - er, We will
3. We will work with each oth - er, We will
4. All__ praise to the Fa - ther, From__



1. one in the Lord, We are one in the
2. walk hand in hand, We will walk with each
3. work side by side, We will work with each
4. whom all things come, And all praise to Christ



1. Spir-it, We are one in the Lord, And we
2. oth-er, We will walk hand in hand, And to -
3. oth-er, We will work side by side, And we'll
4. Je-sus, His__ on - ly__ Son, And all



1. pray that all u - ni - ty may
2. geth - er we'll spread the news that
3. guard each man's dig - ni - ty and
4. praise to the Spir - it, who__



1. one day be re-stored. And they'll know we are
2. God is in our land.
3. save__ each man's pride.
4. makes__ us__ one.



Chris-tians by our love, by our love, Yes, they'll know.

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we are Chris-tians by our love.