

THE WAY OF JESUS  
"I. In Decision"

INTRODUCTION Life is a never ending series of decisions to be made and of problems to be solved. There are times when we feel bewildered by this necessity and it helps to remember that decision-making is a symbol of man's dignity. He is the only part of God's creation that can exercise moral responsibility in the rendering of a ~~decision~~... *CHOICE*...

The decisions we face can be complex. We all have those times when we are confronted with having to decide what to do about a family problem or a business transaction, or a personal habit. ~~There are involved decisions about civic concerns, political dilemmas, international affairs. We must decide what to believe, what to say, what to do.~~ We find times when our loyalties conflict. It's little wonder that the world applauds the man who can make a clear-cut, straight-forward decision without quibbling. And not only applaud, but also reward him.

Several of the Lenten sermons this year will attempt to explore the methods that Jesus used in dealing with difficult life situations. Built around the theme, "The Way of Jesus", today's sermon deals specifically with the way of Jesus in a time of decision.

TEMPTATION EXPERIENCE You'll recall that during the "silent years" in Galilee, there came to Jesus the growing consciousness of a divine commission to reveal God and to reconcile the broken life of man to the Will of God. While this was the great task, the basic question regarding procedure and method remained unanswered. How was He to go about this?

The way in which Jesus found the answer to this question is described in the Temptation Story. After His baptism and before entering His public ministry, He withdrew into the hill country above Jericho. In this wilderness area, Jesus put in forty days and nights in quiet thought, in active inner struggle, attempting to resolve in His own mind the method He would employ in His ministry. It's written in the beautiful imagery of the East that during this period Satan confronted Him with three temptations. Perhaps it would be more accurate to use the word "testing" rather than "temptation". Jesus was testing. He was evaluating. He was rejecting alternative courses of action. For Him, it was a time of decision.

TURN STONES INTO BREAD The first temptation was to turn the stones into bread.

This suggests to us that he must have been experiencing hunger. He was conscious of possessing unique and unusual power. He was being tempted to use it selfishly to satisfy His own needs. Some scholars have interpreted this first temptation as a real temptation on the part of Jesus to become the "economic" Messiah of His people. The people of His land were hungry. He could win a large following by feeding them and by meeting their material needs. But He was also wise enough to know that loyalty built on such an approach was not long-lasting, that it could easily be lured away by a larger offer. Have we not found on occasion - much to our chagrin - that in the area of Foreign Policy we cannot always buy friends by giving them food.

Now Jesus, after much struggle, resolved this temptation by recognizing that life must be built upon something more than outward aspects of material existence. He countered this First Temptation with words from the Law:

"Man does not live by bread alone, but by every Word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord."

LEAP FROM THE PINNACLE

In the Second Temptation, Jesus was testing and evaluating another possible Messianic role. He would jump from the pinnacle of the Temple and land at the foot of it unharmed. In other words, He would gain the attention of people by resorting to a bit of dazzle. Call it sensationalism, if you will...but He knew in His heart that today's wonder is tomorrow's commonplace. And during His ministry there were times when He refused to give in to those who said, "Jesus, give us a sign".

Showmanship and sensationalism cannot furnish a permanent basis for a religious movement. I think we need to remember this in our churches and in spreading the Gospel News. Gimmeckery can lead to frustration and eventual failure.

Genuine strength in the Church grows out of a desire to hear once again the old story of what God has done for mankind in and through His disclosure of Himself in the person of Jesus Christ. We come - not to be dazzled or entertained - but to expose ourselves anew to the holiness of God, to experience forgiveness, cleansing, renewal, reassurance and to fill our minds with the will of God as it comes to us in the life and teachings, the light and love of Jesus of Nazareth.

Again, Jesus countered this second temptation with a word from the Scripture, "You shall not tempt the Lord, your God".

A POLITICAL MESSIAH

In the third temptation, Jesus evaluated the possibility of assuming the role of a political Messiah, a military messiah.

And this is what a lot of the people were expecting of Him. Take up the sword, organize the people, drive the Romans out of the country. Remember how the Tempter took Jesus up to a high point and said that if Jesus would bow down and worship Him, He could enter into the possession of the Kingdoms of this world. This was a temptation to tear the shackles of Rome from His people through political power and military might. The exploits of David were part of His heritage. He shared as any good Jew would in the nationalistic expectations of His people. He had heard the cries of those who wanted to use armed violence to restore freedom to the land. But this would mean compromising His own deep convictions. Give the people what they want. Tell them what they want to hear. Every religious leader, every political figure, every prophetic voice must struggle with this temptation.

Jesus refused to become this kind of Messiah. He could not compromise because He submitted every inclination to the will and word of God. And to this final temptation, He responded: "Get thee hence, Satan. Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and Him only shalt thou serve!"

In the book, "The Life and Teaching of Jesus" by Edward Bauman, it says:

"The type of Messianic vocation that Jesus chose in the wilderness becomes clear as His ministry unfolds. One thing He must have known from the beginning. His decision would not be a popular one among a people who had every definite ideas of their

own. He would meet strong opposition from a people who had their own hearts set on bread, miracles and political freedom. It seems likely that the temptation re-occured again and again in His ministry as the crowd tried to make Him a king, as His enemies plotted to kill Him. Jesus never faltered in following the decision that He had made alone with God in the wilderness."

ALONE IN THE WILDERNESS

As we reflect upon the way of Jesus in a time of great decision, certain lessons begin to emerge that we would do well to examine and hopefully remember. Let me put several of them before you.

For one thing, when the important moment came to choose, He did not seek human advice. He went away to settle the problem. I'm sure there were times when He found it necessary to confer with those near to Him, those whom He trusted, but when it came to the all-important moment, He found it necessary to get away by Himself to avoid the clamor of voices pulling Him in different directions.

Reuel Howe, author and pastoral counselor, in a discussion about gaining personal power and maturity, offers this observation:

"The moment of withdrawal from relationship for the sake of self-awareness is a crucial moment in the history of the individual."

When facing a difficult decision, we need to seek physical and psychological withdrawal.

o. [ Jesus had an awareness of what the people were wanting, but for Him it was not enough. He felt a need to seek the awareness of who He was personally and what God wanted Him to do. Such self-discovery is best made in solitude.

I think our tendency is to do just the opposite. Our tendency is to take a poll, to find out what others think and perhaps take our direction from that. At times, even our decision as to what is right and what is wrong is dictated by what the majority does. Shakespeare's word, "to thine own self be true" is not irresponsible license. The Christian faith, with its emphasis upon individual integrity, is a safeguard against the loss of courage and conviction. "To thine own self be true". It is imperative in the life of the individual.

As you face a difficult decision, follow the example of Jesus. Get away by yourself. Ask the question: is this true to the best and the highest that I know about myself. How will it affect my health, my character, my future, my emotional life. And, if as one contemplates a decision, one finds it will hurt rather than help, enslave rather than upbuild life, then be careful - it may deserve rejection!

REFUSED THE SHORT VIEW

A second lesson to be learned from this is that Jesus refused to take the short view of life. He wanted a following. It would have been easier and quicker to seek results by sensational means. He could have won popularity by compromise. Had He done so, He would have been forgotten. Rather He chose the slow, but enduring way of teaching a small group of men some truths about the nature of life and of God's Kingdom and then took His place on a cross.

The first page of Will Durant's book, "The Story of Philosophy" sets our quest in perspective. He writes,

"We want to know that the little things are little, and the big things big, before it is too late; we want to see things now as they will seem 'in the light of eternity'".

In the process of making a decision, I believe this is a valid question: how will this look in the light of eternity? This bit of perception might make a difference in the quality of our choices. Long term rather than immediate desires. If we refuse the short view of life, then we will give up momentary pleasures for the sake of more lasting values.

The business man, the doctor, the teacher, the preacher, the mother with growing children - all soon learn that decisions must be made not on the basis of expediency, the desire for a "quick buck" popularity, or the line of least resistance, or any other value. It was said of John Wesley, that much of his power was "in the kingly neglect of trifles". Nothing was allowed to get in the way of his main business. His decisions were made on the basis of how they would look in the light of eternity. "The kingly neglect of trifles". A good thought to carry along with you.

Jesus refused to take the short view of life. Cheap compromises, quick sensationalism, immediate popularity - all were rejected by Him.

TO DO GOD'S WILL Third, the decisions of Jesus were dictated by His desire to do the will of God. This was the central, fixed point that gave direction to His every action. In His moments of testing, He would say, "You live by every Word that cometh from God".

Daniel Webster was once asked what he considered to be the greatest thought he ever had. After a bit of hesitation he replied, "The most important thought that ever occupied my mind is that...of my individual responsibility to God."

How would you have answered it? What is the central, the fixed point of conviction that gives form and substance to your daily decisions? Do you have one? I believe the thoughtful and serious Christian might take as his basic point of reference this question: "What does my loyalty to and understanding of the teachings of Christ require of me in this situation?" ~~Granted...we know of the complexity of making decisions in the world in which we live. The answer to that question may not always be absolutely clear to us, but at least asking that question will raise the kind of consideration that should be given to the decisions that we make.~~

CONCLUSION If we would seek light from above on those difficult decisions we face, we would do well to act in the spirit of Christ and take seriously His word of counsel and try to move as best we can on the path He traveled. ~~Over and over again we will be helped by having some deep, fundamental and central loyalty to our lives.~~ And certainly the greatest decision that one can make is to make this person, Jesus, the Lord of all life and to submit our actions to His Word and His Way. Whittier put it simply and beautifully in those lines taken from our closing hymn:

"In simple trust like theirs who heard, beside the Syrian  
Sea,  
The gracious calling of the Lord - let us, like them,  
without a word,  
Rise up and follow Thee."

PRAYER Guide us, O God, as we try to follow Our Lord and Master into the wilderness. Be with each of us in our time of testing and temptation. Help us in our decisions. And as we face the great decisions of life, grant that we may always remember the example of Jesus who came out of the wilderness sure that He would rather be right with You and perhaps fail, than to be wrong with You and to succeed. In His spirit we pray. Amen.