Choosing Against Ourselves

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

Grace Hills Baptist Church

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 Friday morning, I woke up and didn’t feel like doing anything. Have you ever had a morning like that? I was supposed to get up on Friday morning, pull on my running shoes, and go for a jog, then come home for a healthy breakfast. It’s been part of my plan this summer to lose some weight and get ready for a 5k later this year. But…I didn’t do any of that. The dog was barking, my son was in a whiny mood, and I just plain didn’t feel like it. So what did I do? I said to my wife, “Want to go to Hardee’s?” And that’s what we did. I didn’t run – I sat. And I didn’t eat a healthy breakfast. Instead, I had a country-fried steak biscuit and tater tots – a breakfast that isn’t within a mile of healthy. No wonder when I got to the office I felt sluggish and grouchy! I had made a couple of choices that weren’t the best. I chose against myself.

 We do this all the time, don’t we? We choose the Big Mac when we should choose the salad. We stay up late to catch the end of a football game or a TV movie, or read “just one more” chapter in our book, when we know we need to get up and be fresh the next morning. We put off going to the doctor or the dentist for our checkup. We procrastinate by meeting a friend for lunch or doing something fun when we know we should be getting something else done or meeting a deadline. We choose against ourselves all the time – and often, we find we are paying the price.

 This makes absolutely no sense. Take my example from Friday morning. It is completely in my best interest to run or work out consistently, since it improves my cardiovascular health while lowering my weight. Yet in that moment early Friday morning, I just wanted to collapse in my armchair instead of lacing on my running shoes and shuffling around my neighborhood. And getting a country-fried steak biscuit at Hardee’s is so much worse for me than the oatmeal or the banana I would have had at home. So why did I do what I certainly know was not the best choice for me? Because I was distracted by my fatigue, tempted by my armchair, and seduced by the salty-fatty deliciousness that is country-fried steak on a Hardee’s biscuit.

 Hopefully, the only consequences of my Friday choices will be a few hours of feeling less-than-healthy, and I’ll make better choices in the days and weeks ahead. And I did get my run in on Friday night. But life, as we know, is full of choices – and there are plenty of opportunities for us to make choices that can end up hurting us in the end. We can choose to drink and drive, or operate a motor vehicle at unsafe speeds while refusing to wear our seatbelt. We can choose to abuse our spouse or child. We can choose to steal from our employer or tear down a relationship with a family member. We can choose to do any number of things that can land us in jail, jeopardize our lives or the lives of those we love, and shatter our reputation in the community. We have tons of opportunities to choose against ourselves.

 Unfortunately, one of the ways we often choose against ourselves is by neglecting our spiritual life. I know – because I do it, too. I know that I should read my Bible every day – but there are days and even weeks where I find time has passed and it has stayed on the shelf except for getting ready for Bible study or sermons. I know that spending time in prayer draws me closer to God and has tangible benefits for my life – but there are periods of time where my prayers are perfunctory at best. I know that helping other people is something that not only serves them and honors God, but also makes my life better – and yet there are times when I avoid opportunities to help others. And, of course, I know that a follower of Christ is to make Christ’s teachings first and foremost in their lives for their own good – but there are many chances where I choose to do something other than what Jesus would do. And I’m not the only one. There are people here today – perhaps even all of us – who choose against ourselves when it comes to matters of faith, as well.

 As Israel’s leader Moses prepared to turn Israel over to his chosen successor, Joshua, he knew that Israel also would have tons of opportunities to choose against themselves and the path God wanted them to walk. They hadn’t exactly instilled a lot of confidence in the previous forty years. They did everything from complaining because they were a little short of rations to becoming downright self-endangering, as when they tried to enter the Promised Land without God’s blessing or protection. As we will see next week in the episode of the golden calf, they could panic at the slightest uncertainty and wander off into the realm of false worship that not only offended God but harmed them. So as he prepared to lay down the mantle of leadership, Moses had a few words of warning for his people.

 He begins with some stark words. “See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity.” Whatever he has to teach them, whatever is among his final instructions to the people of Israel, it must be pretty important. This is life-or-death stuff here! What could possibly be so serious?

 In short, Moses says that following God’s way is the way that leads to life, to blessing, and to shalom, that holistic sense of peace that is often held up as a life goal in Scripture. This way is found, according to Moses, in the commandments, decrees, and ordinances of Scripture: the guidelines for behavior, the reminders of acceptable actions, the warnings against bad choices. These rules and regulations spell out what faithful adherence to God’s path looks like, and sticking to that path would, Moses said, be the best possible choice his hearers could make.

 Over time, of course, our outlook has changed a bit. Jesus came and taught extensively, clarifying just what God’s best path looks like. Paul and other teachers of the early church continued that process of clarification and definition, giving ever-clearer pictures of what God’s way is for those who follow Christ. And, of course, down through the centuries local pastors and teachers and fellow travelers on the way of Christ have helped new generations understand God’s call for them to walk his path in an ever-changing world. Yet it is hard to argue with Moses here: when we live lives that take God seriously, when we strive to love our neighbor as ourselves, when we learn not to covet what others have and be content with what we have, when we remain faithful to our spouses and honor our parents, when we put God first and seek him above all, then life really is better. Life really is good. Life really is what Jesus said he brings: life to the full.[[1]](#footnote-1)

 That seems to be pretty clear, from Moses to Jesus to today. So what could possibly go wrong? Well, as Moses said to the people of Israel, we have a choice. He said they could choose to remain on God’s path, follow his commands, and experience the fullness of life under God’s care. But they could also choose a different path…with disastrous consequences. “But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you shall perish.”[[2]](#footnote-2) There were competing allegiances for the people of Israel, religious gods, to be sure, but also other idols: greed, fear, control, power, leisure, ambition, national pride, and the like. In short, anything that drew them away from God and led them off the path – whether intentionally or not – would also lead away from the abundant life God had designed for them. There is not a hint here that God would smite the Israelites if they chose to turn away from God – just the assurance that this other path would lead not to life, but to death. They had the option to choose against themselves.

 We also have that chance. God, you see, does not force himself upon us. He does not make us slaves, compelled to live his way of life by force, and we are not mere automatons that he has programmed to live a certain way. And so we have this wonderful thing called freedom – freedom to do what we wish, freedom to go where we want, freedom to ignore God’s commands, and also freedom to follow them. We have freedom, then, to choose what’s in our best interest – or to choose against ourselves. God has designed a way of life that leads to joy, Jesus has called us to walk his path filled with love and grace – but we don’t have to walk it. We can give our allegiance to other gods – to money, to power, to prestige, to leisure. We can live our lives for selfish purposes. We can close our eyes and pretend like the problems of the world aren’t our problems and the pain of the world isn’t our responsibility. We can reject all of those burdensome rules and regulations, as we think they are, and instead live by the beat of our own drummer. We can do all of that – we are free, after all – but if we do, we will just be choosing against ourselves.

 There is another option, though. As Moses says, “Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him.”[[3]](#footnote-3) When we choose to follow the way of God, to follow in the footsteps of Christ, we find that life is better. Our burdens are shared and our joys are multiplied. We become part of a family defined not by who we are or what we can do, but by whose we are – God’s – and what Jesus has done. When we love with Jesus’ kind of love, we don’t have room for hate. When we trust in God’s enduring goodness, we don’t have to resort to fear. When we walk in the commands of God and the teachings of Christ, we don’t hurt others or ourselves. When we choose the way of God, we choose for ourselves, not against ourselves.

 What choices are you making in your life right now? Are you choosing to follow God’s path, to make his commands a priority? Are you learning the teachings of Jesus and following his example in your life? If you are, then you are choosing for yourself – because there is no better way of life in the world. But if you are like me, sometimes you choose other paths, turn aside to other allegiances and priorities and ways of life – what the Bible calls other gods – and you choose the path of idolatry. That is, undoubtedly, the epitome of choosing against yourself. It is, Moses says, the way of death. If that’s you – if you’ve been doing that too much recently, and it’s led you out of the path of God’s will, then I’d like to give you an invitation today.

 In just a few moments, we’re going to share together the Lord’s Supper. This is a symbolic meal we share to remember the last meal Jesus shared with his followers before his death. And traditionally, Paul tells us, this is an opportunity for reflection and self-evaluation. It’s a chance to be honest with where we’re walking the path Christ calls us to walk – and where we’ve chosen against Christ and against ourselves. Let this time of reflection stir your heart. And then, as we share the bread and the cup together, let us all recommit ourselves to make the right choice, day by day: to follow the commands of God, to obey the teachings of Christ, to, as Moses says, choose life. This is how we choose for ourselves – let’s not wait another day to make the choice. Let us pray.

1. John 10:10 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Deuteronomy 30:17-18a [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Deut. 30:19b-20a [↑](#footnote-ref-3)