

“Life Choices”

**Pastor Dave Carlson
First Presbyterian Church
Sunday, November 3, 2013**

Old Testament Lesson – Exodus 33:12-17

New Testament Lesson – 1 Peter 4:1-4, 8-11

I was leading a mission trip to the Dominican Republic several years back when I overheard one of the Dominicans talking about the Catholics and the Christians. It was clear that, in his mind, they are two completely different groups of people.

In my mind, we all believe in God and follow Christ as Lord and Savior. So what's the difference? Which is what I asked him – “What's the difference between Catholics and Christians?” And he said “We're Christian; we don't drink or smoke.”

Wow! That says a lot. Being a Christian in a Southern Hemisphere country means acting differently from others. That's where they place the emphasis – on visible, behavioral difference.

For us, in our Western culture, we don't tend to think of drinking or smoking as deal breakers when it comes to being Christian. Which mean, we've actually got it harder when it comes to maintaining our Christian identity. It's easier to live in a culture where your faith so strictly dictates your choices. But then you have fewer choices.

Those who have more choices in life, like us, have a harder time maintaining our faith-based values amid a world of diverse thoughts and behaviors. Jesus doesn't dictate every aspect of our lives with a list of do's and don'ts. Jesus never said don't drink or smoke, though doing anything that destroys your health or adversely influences others is against God's will. And in the knowledge of that, each of us has to discern and discover what is God's will for our lives as individuals, and thus as families and churches and other faith-based groups.

There's no easy way to decide absolutely and completely which behaviors are in and which are out when it comes to living faithfully, not that there aren't do's and don'ts. There are. In fact, Peter gives us some do's and don'ts in today's New Testament lesson. He says, “... Live for the rest of your earthly life no longer by human desires, but by the will of God.” “You have already spent enough time in doing what the Gentiles like to do, living in licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing, and lawless idolatry.”

Whatever Peter means by “licentiousness, passions, drunkenness, revels, carousing, and lawless idolatry,” it is clear that followers of Jesus should behave outwardly different from non-Christians. And that this should be just as evident to those who look in on our lives as it was for the early Christians when 1 Peter was written.

As the non-Christians in Peter's letter, look at the life choices of those who are followers of Christ, "they are surprised," says Peter, surprised "that (the Christians) no longer join them in the same excesses." In other words, people ought to look at your life as a Christian and mine and be shocked by how you spend your time, talents and treasure. Are they? That's something we can each ask ourselves.

It's something we should each be struggling with. Life is a struggle for those who have made a commitment to Christ to maintain and uphold faith-based values. That's just the way it is in a world full of choice and temptation. It's not easy to abstain from partying all the time, just because that's not what God intends for our lives. It's not easy to refrain from speaking bad about others, just because it's unchristian. It's not easy to give up what little we have to help someone else in need, or to head out to church or to a service project while everyone else is plugged into sports, or relaxing at home, or hanging out at the mall.

And it's not supposed to be easy, because it is supposed to be noticeable. As Christians, we are to live life differently, and being different is never easy. It means we have to refrain from saying certain things and abstain from doing certain things, and that in this, people should be able to tell that we are Christian. And sometimes, they ought to be a little surprised by what we say and do as Christians!

A couple invited some people to dinner and as they gathered at the table, the wife turned to their 6-year-old daughter and said, "Would you like to say the blessing?" "I wouldn't know what to say," said her daughter. "Just say what you hear Mommy say." So the little girl bowed her head and said: "Dear Lord, why on earth did I invite all these people?"

What we say and do is a reflection of who we are. It reveals to us and to the world how much time we spend thinking about and developing Christian practices – like praying at meals

Yet, if you look behind the veil of anyone's life, you're going to see that we all fall short. And we shouldn't be surprised by that. The surprising thing about Christians is how, even when we do fall short and act badly, we still love each other and support each other.

It's not about being perfect, as if we have finally made it and can now sit back and enjoy ourselves. Nor is it about settling for good enough. Being a follower of Christ is about knowing that no one is perfect, and especially not us, and then acting in faith on that knowledge so that we make better life choices.

Peter gives us a model for Christian living when he says, "Above all, maintain constant love for one another.... Be hospitable to one another without complaining. Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received." "Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ."

When we let our God-given faith dictate our words and actions, that's when what we say and do actually becomes "God's voice to one another,"¹ speaking the very words of God. "Live for the rest of your earthly life," says Peter, "... so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ." Can you imagine reflecting God in all that we say and do? The world would indeed be a different place. Our families would be different, our workplaces different, our communities different, even our church – different, if we made sure God was shining through all that we say and do.

We all have areas of our lives in which we could be more faithful. That's what it means to be building up the Kingdom of God – being open to changes in how we live, changes that people can look at and tie to our faith in Christ.

Building up the Kingdom of God means putting ourselves – our words and actions – under the lordship of Jesus Christ. Think about what that might mean for you, today. Pray about it – words and actions that could be more Christ-like; areas of life that could be more faithful, less unmanageable. And then ask God how you can achieve that; tailoring your life more and more toward Christ-like living.

God has brought you to this place today for a reason. Know that this church is a place that you can turn to for guidance and support. We all need help in making the right choices in life. This community of faith stands ready to help, to help anyone and everyone who is open to growing in the faith, anyone – you or someone you know – anyone who is open to the difficult but life-giving task of turning to Jesus in making all of our life choices.

Pastoral Prayer

We come to this place of prayer, loving God, grateful for the celebrations of life.

For the gathering of our church families and for the joy of welcoming new members to our worshiping family, we give you thanks.

For the gift of water, especially as it comes to us bringing the gift of life in you, we offer our prayers of thanksgiving.

We thank you for our children, who cause us to dig deep for patience and fill us with joy overflowing.

We thank you for our youth, who are learning to stand firm in their faith even as they question some of our beliefs and practices in an attempt to make their faith in Christ stronger.

Keep us mindful, we pray, of the gift of your presence when we travel through difficult days, when the path ahead is treacherous, and when the way before us is unclear.

Help us to remember that there is no struggle beyond the reach of your love, which never lets us go.

¹ The New Interpreters' Bible, 1 Peter, David L. Bartlett, Lantz Professor of Preaching and Communication, The Divinity School, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.

We thank you for your love as evidenced by the life of your son our Lord and Savior, in whose name we lift our voices in song as we pray:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.