

# CHOOSE TODAY

Sermon given by Dan Phillips

At Caroline Valley Community Church

February 13, 2011

7<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Christmas 2010

Deuteronomy 30:11-30

<sup>11</sup>"For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. <sup>12</sup>It is not in heaven, that you should say, 'Who will ascend to heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' <sup>13</sup>Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, 'Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it?' <sup>14</sup>But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it.

<sup>15</sup>See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. <sup>16</sup>If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you today, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. <sup>17</sup>But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, <sup>18</sup>I declare to you today, that you shall surely perish. You shall not live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess. <sup>19</sup>I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, <sup>20</sup>loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them."

We live in a world packed with choices. We can choose to watch one of hundreds of television channels. We can choose to live in many different houses, in many different neighborhoods. We can choose to eat at home, or in a restaurant. We can choose to eat hundreds of different meals, from many different ethnic and national backgrounds. We can read one of thousands of books from the library, or from the book store. We can surf the internet, play computer games, play sports, do nature walks, or plant a garden. If you plant a garden, you can plant hundreds of different plants, and use many different methods of raising them. Today, we literally have more choices than we have time. In fact, some people have suggested that the great number of choices that we have is overwhelming us emotionally and socially, breaking us down and separating us from each other.

The Bible, too, is full of choices. I believe that the concept of the moral choice is the basic concept of the Bible. God made us different from animals, and that difference is the capacity to make moral choices, to understand what moral choices are. God wanted to have a complete, moral relationship with Adam and Eve, and so God put a tree in the garden and told them not to eat from it. That command created the possibility of morality for people who did not know what morality was. They could have asked God why. They could have told God about the conversation with the snake BEFORE they ate. Adam and Eve could have

done many things differently, and the way they carried out their actions showed the moral choice they made: the wrong one!

Likewise, God warns Cain not to sin. Cain's sin was not just being angry, it was holding that anger and nursing it until it became murder. God warns Cain not to make that choice, but Cain does. And so it goes: Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, especially Jacob, and Joseph have moral choices. And their choices influence their lives.

In our text today, we read about a time when Moses puts the entire people of Israel on notice that they had a choice. The children of Israel had come out of Egypt, and spent forty years in the desert becoming a nation. They were ready now to enter Canaan, and so Moses speaks to them. Moses is old, and ready to die, and has been told by God that he will not get to enter Canaan. So he gives his farewell address, his last sermon to the people he has led for forty years.

The essence of this last sermon was very simple. You, said Moses to the people assembled, have a choice. You can choose to obey the God who brought you out of Egypt and brought you to this place. If you choose to obey God, then you will have a long life, and will enjoy the country of Canaan, which God will give into your hands. If, however, you choose not to obey God, then you will suffer death, and pain, and will no longer have the country of Canaan for your own. These, said Moses, are your two choices. So choose.

Such a simple message! In fact, it's so simple that we have to ask why a dying man would take up his time giving this message to these people. What did Moses think they would say? Did he think they would say "no" and reject God? Did he think they would choose death? Of course, given such a choice, everyone will say "yes". Of course they would choose life. Everyone would. So why even bother to speak such words?

Yet, oddly enough, the people of Israel did, eventually, choose death. They forgot the commands that God gave, they practiced evil, and they reaped the destruction of their own world. If it is hard to understand why Moses would ask such a question, it is even harder to understand why people would make such a choice.

Moses speaks these words because he knows that, while it is easy to listen to God's spokesman and say YES it is often just as easy, in the long run, to forget what we have heard and say NO with our day to day actions. As human beings, we need the verbal reminders that we live in world of moral consequences. Moses was taking the long view when he asked the people this question. They answered using a short view. It is easy to get excited and feel the Spirit and pledge to be righteous. What is hard is to live it out.

We live in a world that presents us with small choices, small moral choices, every day, every hour. We often think that because we have verbally given assent to the need for righteous behavior, we are finished. But that is just a beginning. As Christians, we have established a personal relationship with Jesus. We have accepted Jesus as our Savior, and we proclaim our willingness to obey his words. And we think that we have made the moral choice forever.

But, like the Jews, we forget, we grow lazy. We hear God's word on Sunday, and we feel energized to live the good life. Then we wake up on Monday and wonder why we were so excited the day before. We yell at the children while they get ready for school, we drive too fast going to work, we ignore the opportunities to help others at work and in the neighborhood, we get caught up in our own lives, and we forget all the words we thought were important on Sunday. This is how we live. And this is precisely why we need to hear frequently that life is about the choice between good and evil, the choice between life and death.

Well, you say, that's all good, but life isn't really that simple. There are more than two choices, and I get lost trying to determine what is good and bad, what is right and wrong. Yes, that's true for you, and me, and everyone. We all struggle to determine what is right. Or, more accurately, we often struggle to determine what is right. Sometimes, we just quit trying, and do whatever. Sometimes, then, the choice is between trying to do what is right, and just doing what is easiest, or best for us. This is the same choice that Moses spoke, just restated in a different way. It is not necessary for us to always know exactly what is right, and what is wrong. But it is always necessary for us to try to know. As long as we keep on trying to do God's will, we will be in the right. God promises to help us with that. Our evil, then, comes when we quit trying to know the difference between right and wrong.

Don't misunderstand me. Often our choices are between two or more things that are good, or two or more things that are bad. It is seldom that we seem to get a clear-cut choice between good and evil. But we are commanded to continue struggling with this issue at all times to the best of our ability. And doing nothing is not a way out of this struggle. Often, doing nothing is as much a choice as any other. We may be able to delay some decisions, but most will demand an answer one way or the other.

We usually think of these issues in terms of our individual lives. But Moses is speaking to the whole nation of Israel: he is giving a corporate message. And we need to understand that just as it is necessary for us to individually wrestle with right and wrong, so it is necessary for us as a church to wrestle with the same issues. We need each other when it

comes to deciding on such issues. Your answer may not be mine, but we need to hear each other, and understand that God works in each of us. We are corporately wiser than any of us can individually be.

On this Annual Meeting Sunday it is appropriate to apply this message here. We too are challenged by God to choose life and good over death and evil. We too need to be frequently reminded of what God has done for us, and why we should obey his commands. We too need to be told over and over again that life brings many choices, and they must be made in the Spirit that lives in us, and in this church. Amen.