

CHOICES

Easter 7 Year B

Acts 1:15-17; Ps. 1; 1 Jn. 5:9-13; Jn. 17:6-19

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The traditional time for making life-changing decisions is early in the New Year, when we all make our New Year's resolutions—when we make a conscious decision to change a certain pattern of behaviour or lifestyle or to set new life-goals. Just as traditionally, most New Year's resolutions are forgotten by about March—if they even last that long—and life goes on as it always has—until the next New Year—and so the cycle goes on.

New Year's Resolutions always seem to get a lot of press each year. Ministers have even been known to preach about them. However, during our life we make a lot of decisions—every day in fact—both conscious and unconscious decisions. Big decisions and little decisions—from what to wear when we get up in the morning and what cereal we have each day, to life-changing decisions such as the subjects we choose at high-school or the professions we choose—decisions that will affect us throughout the rest of our lives.

Whether we realise it or not, we often stand at crossroads in our lives. There are those *specific* times when we have to make choices as to which path we should take. At times, the choice may be a small one, but many times that choice will have a great impact on our lives. Sometimes the choices are easy, but at other times they may be quite difficult.

The choices we make are usually influenced by our philosophy of life. This may be based on a number of things such as our individual wants or needs or perhaps based on our particular worldview. They are also very often based on our attitude towards God and our attitude towards others. Whatever the basis, the choices we make determine our actions.

The words of Eleanor Roosevelt ring true:

“One's philosophy is not best expressed in words. It is expressed in the choices one makes. In the long run, we shape our lives and we shape ourselves. The process never ends until we die. And the choices we make are ultimately our responsibility.”

(Tim Kimmel, *Little House on the Freeway*, 143)

In other words, the choices we make are best expressed in our actions, rather than our words—which is so often the case when we make New Year's resolutions. In all of life and through all the choices we make and act upon, we have to accept responsibility.

One of the best books I've ever read on the subject of making godly choices, is written by Garry Friesen and is called, *Decision Making and the Will of God*. If you would like to discover more in that area for your life, then I strongly recommend it. It is enlightening and incredibly freeing.

Sometimes decisions are not always easy to make—particularly life-changing decisions. One of the ways we can guard against making wrong or bad decisions, is by—in the words of the Psalmist—keeping away from bad company. It's true isn't it, that a lot of our decision making in many areas of our lives is governed by the counsel we receive from those with whom we mix—who also influence our attitudes to life.

One of my mentors a number of years ago said to me, "You are what you are because of the people you meet and the books you read." I have always remembered that and as we look more closely at Psalm 1, we find a certain amount of agreement there as well.

Psalm 1 outlines the attitude and behaviour that a *righteous* person exhibits, in contrast to the attitude and behaviour that an *unrighteous* person exhibits. Rather than beginning by talking about what the righteous person does, however, he talks about what the righteous person does not do—and only later talks about what this person does do.

There is a saying that states, "If you lay down with the dogs, you get up with the fleas." In other words, if you keep bad company, then their influence will be rubbed off on you. Psalm 1 shows us the effects that bad company can have on one's life and choices. A person who surrounds him/herself with bad company will go from bad to worse. A person who continually listens to bad counsel will be adversely affected by it. It's impossible to keep the company of bad people without being contaminated by both their ideas and their habits.

First, to follow the advise of the wicked is to listen to and follow the advise of those who live their lives in a worldly, self-centred manner. It is to listen to and accept the humanistic and self-centred cultural norms of our society. It is to accept a philosophy and worldview that is at odds with the Christian principles of love and mercy, grace and repentance.

Secondly, to take the path that sinners tread is to go a step further—it is not only accepting this non-Christian worldview—it is living that worldly, self-centred lifestyle. Once this worldview has been accepted, it then follows that these people will then act as *they* do.

Finally, to sit in the seat of scoffers is to fellowship with those who have accepted this worldview, which is at odds with Christian faith and practice. It is to fellowship with those who have rejected God. It is not only agreeing with a self-centred world-view and living it, sitting in the seat of scoffers is becoming so entrenched in the lie, that they join those who speak out against God.

In these three actions—*following the advice of the wicked, taking the path that sinners tread and sitting in the seat of scoffers*—there is a progression—a progression that draws attention to the way thinking leads to behaviour, which in turn, leads to belonging. It is the process by which a person's choice of allegiance is made and carried through.

Wrong thinking leads to wrong living and wrong living will ultimately hinder our worship, for if we go down that path, we will ultimately seek our allegiance and fellowship with those who are wicked, rather than with those who are righteous through Christ, so that the Body of Christ may be built up rather than torn down.

You might say, at this point, "That's what I do. I don't mix with bad people, and I fellowship with other Christians all the time." To leave the Psalm there, however, would I believe, do it an injustice.

There is another aspect to this of which we need to take notice, because our life-choices do not end when we join the church. The Christian life is a continual succession of choices—choices that relate to our attitudes and our actions—choices that influence how we live out our Christian life—choices that can build up the body of Christ—and choices that can tear it down.

Perhaps you will allow me the liberty to rephrase the first part of the psalm to highlight what I am talking about. For instance:

Blessed are those

*who do not listen to the gossip of those who love to put others down,
or act upon the gossip of others and so live their lives in ignorance and bitterness,
or become gossips and cynics themselves, drawing others into their circle of bitterness.*

Just because you and I belong to the church, it doesn't mean that we cannot be led astray by the ungodly thinking or actions of others—even within the church. Gossiping may be only one aspect that we could focus on. There are probably many others.

As Christians, we must always be on our guard against those within the church who are negative and who through their negativity bring others down and so create disunity within the Body of Christ.

Those who are “blessed” or “happy”, however, depending on which version of the psalm you read, are those who stay away from such people—who do not allow themselves to be negatively influenced by the thoughts and actions of those who tear down rather than build up.

Rather, the “blessed” person is the person who spends their time in worship and meditation of God’s word. Their lives are lived in harmony with God and with others. Their lives build others up rather than pull them down. Their lives are lives lived with Christian integrity based on God’s gift of grace. The truly righteous person delights in the law of the Lord. They just absolutely love the Word of God. They do not find it oppressive or limiting but through it find freedom and abundant life.

People who think wrong invariably act wrong. Wrong behaviour comes from wrong thinking. Wrong thinking comes from wrong standards. The standard for right thinking is God’s word. The person who is truly blessed will use God’s Word as his/her standard rather than the self-centred standards of the wicked.

In John chapter 17, Jesus prays for his disciples and not only his disciples but also those who will follow them—us—you and me. He prays that we might not be taken out of the world but that we might be sanctified in the truth—the truth that is contained in God’s Word—the truth that is shown to us in the birth, life, ministry, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ—the truth that comes to us in the message of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Do you delight in the Law of the Lord? Do you love to pour over God’s Word—to study it—to squeeze out of it every morsel of life-giving refreshment and heart-filling enjoyment? If you do, then the Psalmist says that you are truly most blessed—that you are indeed a tree planted by streams of water—a tree that is strong—a tree that that bears much fruit.

May God sanctify you and make you whole, for the glory of his name. Amen.