

No Choice

Matthew 7:21-29 ~ January 1, 2017 ~ Heritage Lutheran Church

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.

Today's text seems to present the listener with a choice. Much of the time this text is presented as suggesting there is some kind of option open to us. We can either build our house upon the rock or build it on the sand. Much is made of the act of freewill to choose our way into heaven. It is often taught that making our choice for God is the key element in our salvation. There is a great deal of energy invested in Christian circles to emphasize how moral choices, as an act of free will, are the crucial human ingredients in our salvation. Today we are going to try and sort out how that understanding is both true and false. To do this we will need to better comprehend the nature of **grace** and its power in our lives.

As Jesus concludes the body of teaching we call The Sermon on the Mount, he makes a startling revelation. He says,

Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

This verse should shock us and even perhaps dismay us. Most of us assume that we can surely tell who is a Christian and who is not. And when we think about that assumption we usually mean the moral behavior that people choose to exhibit in their lives. Particularly we mean religiously moral behavior. But Jesus explicitly rejects that as a true indicator of a person's salvation when he says...

Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'

Those who stand before Jesus to proclaim themselves Christian by the acts that they have performed, stand on shaky ground. Those whom Jesus is disavowing are the ones who have staked their claim on their own decisions and their own actions. This is why Jesus warns us against making judgment. Any judgment, either negative or positive can lead us astray. What would happen to us if we judged those who say "Lord, Lord" as

great examples of true Christians and tried to emulate them? What if convinced of their sincerity we tried to pattern our faith around their religious teachings? Would we not end up with the same final judgment that they do?

Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'

Do you feel a chill running down your back? This is indeed a serious matter. Is there a way through this dangerous passage? How do we navigate our lives past such hazards?

The focus for life in Christ is always the **WILL** of God the Father. What is it that Jesus first teaches us to pray for in the Lord's Pray?

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Your **WILL** be done. It is God's will that is central to our salvation. It is not our will. It is not our choice. It is the ever present, life creating **WILL** of God. Only in this context can we even hope to begin to navigate the complexities of life in the Kingdom of God. This is exactly what Jesus means when he says in today's text,

Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

It is the will of Jesus' Father that truly matters. Our only hope lies in seeking God's will with all our hearts. And this is not a choice for us. It is not like we have the option to seek God's will or we have the option to seek our own will. God's Spirit drives us toward the will of God. And Satan hides his mastery of our wills in the illusion that we have the freedom to choose. When you come to see the truth of this situation, are you really eager to make a choice? Or would you rather insist that you have no choice at all and instead put all your faith in the Grace of God?

Our problem here is that our understanding of God's will as the foundation of life in the Kingdom of God is mostly theoretical. We struggle sometimes to bring it out of that theoretical realm into the practical. But Jesus teaching in the Sermon on the Mount is primarily intended to be practical. So how do we, in practically terms, discern the will of God?

Let's look at a common example that might help us to understand. Imagine a small boy setting alone at a dining table with a pile of carrots on his plate. He has been told that

he has to eat the carrots before he is allowed to leave the table. Isn't this a battle of the will? It is the child's will against his parents' will. The child's will is that he doesn't particularly like the taste of carrots. But his parents' will is that he eat carrots as an important component of his diet. Does the child have a choice in this matter? Yes, he can choose not to put a bite of carrot in his mouth. But the consequence is that he has to remain sitting at the table while the other children in the family have already gone off to play. This is not really a choice is it? Notice the Parents are not physically forcing the carrots into their child. Rather they are using measured discipline to teach the child that eating nutritious food has a long term value beyond the taste sensation in the moment.

So now let us ask how is freewill functioning here? The only choice for the child to exercise his free will is to continue to sit at the table with the uneaten pile of carrots on his plate. Would it be a good thing for us to encourage him to exercise his free will? Should we say to him that he is free to make the decision he wants? Or should we point out that things will go well for him both nutritionally and enjoyably if he seeks the will of his parents and does it? Wouldn't it be best if we could convince him that he has no choice?

This is the underside of grace. We tend to think of grace as God freeing us from sin. And indeed that is what it does. But grace also carries with it the loving discipline of God. God is not going to free us from sin just to let us sin all the more. This is why seeking God's will is so important. Every situation in life becomes an occasion for God to draw us closer to Himself. This is why the emphasis upon our own choice, our own free will is so unhelpful, even dangerous. That frame of mind leads us into a life of saying "Lord, Lord" without really seeking God's true will for our lives.

Let us consider one more example. You are standing at checkout in a store and the cashier hands you a twenty dollar bill in change when she should have handed you a ten dollar bill. What do you do? It seems you have a choice doesn't it. You could put the money in your wallet without saying anything or you could point out the cashier's error. Which do you do? You know full well the Heavenly Father's will in this matter. Do you really have a choice? Wouldn't you normally say you have no choice but to be fair and draw the mistake to the teller's attention? Again, this is actually grace in action even though we don't normally see it that way.

It is that feeling that all choices have been narrowed to one that brings us to the practical pattern of God's will in our lives. Not all aspects of our lives will express

themselves with this kind of clarity. But if we back away from insisting that it is our decision and moral action that matters, we will be more likely to comprehend on a practical level what it is that God wants us to do. This is what Jesus is talking about when he says:

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. ... But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand...

Hearing Jesus' words and putting them into practice is not an act of our will. It is an act of God through the Holy Spirit's leading us in our lives. About this we have no choice. Life is simply too complicated to boil morality down into a single code of behavior. This does not mean that we become moral relativists. Moral relativism suggests that we are wise enough to make the choice on our own, based on our own knowledge of the current situation. Christian morality is completely different from this. We seek to understand God's will in real life situations by constant study of his word. We seek to encounter his will through prayer. We seek to apply his will by faith in the guidance of the Holy Spirit in our lives. And more often than not, we understand his will when we find that we have no choice. No choice but to do his will in a specific situation.

But even as we follow the will of God, we must humbly acknowledge that we are sinful human beings. Even with very high confidence in God's will for a given situation we need to know that we will also sin. We, of course, try to avoid sin. But the only way to avoid sin altogether is to die in Christ. We know that is not God's will for our lives right now. So as we follow the Spirit's guidance we do so with the humility that our best effort will require God's gracious forgiveness. Satan is far too clever for us. He has trapped every path with false teachings and despair. Only by God's will and his ever present grace can we find a way ahead to follow the call of Jesus to build our houses upon the Rock. But answering that call is not an act of our will. Rather it is faith in the Will of God. In this we truly have no choice.

In closing let us address a teaching of Jesus that often troubles the heart of Christians,

Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven...

Hear we encounter the authority of Jesus Christ. This is the authority of Jesus that amazed those who heard his teaching. But if this word troubles your heart or worries

you in any way, rejoice. That is its purpose. You are among those that God is trying to draw closer to his Spirit. When you feel worried, you are hearing the Spirit's call. When your heart is troubled by this you are hearing the Spirit's warning. Inside your concern you will know that it is not your action that saves you for the kingdom. It is the work of the Holy Spirit in you. Do not despair. Take courage for God is pushing you toward his grace. Come to know that you have no choice. You are saved for eternity by the Grace of God in Jesus Christ.

The cross is full. The tomb is empty. Jesus is alive and leading us out to go, make, baptize and teach disciples. Let us take up our cross and follow him.