

UNTIL WE CHOOSE

This is a very much loved and well-hated passage that we just read. We love to be told that “*God so loved the world*” and that Jesus did not come into the world to “*condemn the world.*” “*There is now no condemnation for those who are united with Christ Jesus.*” But that was last Sunday. Can anything remain true for a whole week in our fast-moving society?

On the other hand, lots of people in our society get very annoyed when John goes on to claim that the unbeliever is under judgment because he has not put his trust in God’s only Son. Clearly, in John’s view, it is not Jesus who is doing the judging, except perhaps inadvertently. Sometimes we feel the judgment of Jesus just because we notice the gap between what He lives for and what *we* live for. But what I really ask myself is: Do the people who love the darkness more than light – and who insist on staying in their darkness – have any responsibility for the judgment they experience? That might be an idle question for most of you. But sometimes I choose the darkness on purpose, and that worries me.

We cannot “save” ourselves – we need a Savior. Many of us know this from personal experience, whether we studied the writings of Martin Luther or not. On our own hook, try as we might, we cannot outwit Satan or rise above the principles of evil. I cannot be sure, but it often seems to me that lots of the people around me think that evil is a pushover – that disobedience to God is not a very big problem. Oh sure, lots of people “out there” are disobedient and are doing bad things. But all we have to do is decide we want to be good – you know, like most of us and our friends have decided to be good – and now we are the “good guys.”

I think this is appalling, and not because I don’t think people want to be good. I think that by our own definitions, most of us really do want to be good. But Lord, deliver me from the people who think it is *easy*, or who think they have already essentially managed it. When we get past our need for forgiveness, I want to be long gone.

Anyway, if we find it too heavy-going to read *The Bondage of the Will* by Martin Luther, we can read *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien. No matter how good their motives, any individual in Tolkien’s story who uses the power of THE RING (self-will; control

over others; domination; the gifts of God, without turning them over to the will and guidance of God) will end up doing evil instead of good. It makes no difference whatsoever how good the motives are. Choosing the good and wanting to do good are completely irrelevant. The power of The Ring just laughs and twists it all around to serve the Evil Lord. And that, by the way, is completely biblical – right out of Romans, just for openers. (“*The good that I would, I do not; but the evil that I would not, that I do.*”) And Tolkien knows it. He is portraying it on purpose.

Beyond that, in the theological perceptiveness of Tolkien, the greater an individual’s spiritual stature, the greater the evil they will do if they fall under the power of The Ring. Gandalf, Aragorn, and Galadriel are at far greater risk of doing great evil than Frodo or Bilbo Baggins. And Saruman has already proved it.

I have friends who do not like Tolkien or *The Lord of the Rings*. It’s only a fairy story, they say – a myth. Indeed! But it is also one of the clearest portrayals of the precepts and principles of evil in our time.

In any case, lots of people love it that God sent his Son into the world to save us. But they deeply resent being told that we have to respond in some way or even Jesus cannot do us any good. If I preach about the *love* of God, they are all smiles – even if they do not intend to do anything about it, or even if they make no attempt whatsoever to comprehend what “love” is really like or about. But if we start to talk about the *disciplines* of the Christian Life, then they say I am scolding them, and they pretend there is no invitation behind it to come into a new and better WAY of Life.

Most coins have two sides to them. The modern liberal church loves to declare “Heads, we win – and there are no tails.” Love is “unconditional” – just a great big blob of gooey, nice-smelling pabulum; it doesn’t really mean anything because it has no borders, no content, and there are no conditions. All well and good, if that’s the truth. But *is* that the truth? Have none of us ever been stubborn, rebellious, disobedient, or contrary with God?

Some of you thought you heard the Gospel last week, and I am so glad of it. “*There is now no condemnation*” But did you notice the full spectrum of that proclamation? The sentence ends: “*for those who are united with Christ Jesus.*” What about “Tails, you lose”? What about those who are *not* united with Christ Jesus?

At that point, feeling uncomfortable, some people will instantly want to get us embroiled in a “world religions” debate: What about other authentic spiritual paths? What if a person is not “united with Christ Jesus” but is on the Eightfold Path of Siddhartha Gautama, or is following Muhammad, or is a devotee of one of the dozens of other spiritual ways being proclaimed in our time? These are issues the writers of the New Testament never heard of and did not try to deal with. We have more options today than most of us can keep up with. If you think you have a better chance at life by following the Buddha than you do by following the Christ, by all means do so. I only hope that such a person will show more allegiance and commitment to the Enlightened One than they have to the Crucified One.

All the great religions of the world share some of the same problems. All of them have a strangely high percentage of “followers” – “members,” “devotees” – who do not take their precepts or their teachings very seriously. As G.K. Chesterton remarked: “The Christian Life has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and left untried.” Or as Jonathan Gamble has said: “Going to seminary is really quite easy, unless you really mean to follow Jesus.”

God sent his Son into the world and the whole world rejoiced and received Him gladly, and set aside their former opinions and purposes and goals and followed Him into God’s Kingdom, at least insofar as it is available to us in the here and now. Is that what you read in your New Testament? That is not what I read in mine.

There is something very challenging, very serious, very demanding about recognizing who Jesus is and starting to understand what kind of LIFE we will have if we try to follow Him. There is also something very alarming about the prospect of recognizing who Jesus is and deciding to go on with life as we have known it before we discovered any special bond between us and Jesus.

It comes clearest to me in the concept of “repentance.” *“Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.”* This is the most familiar and adamant of all the introductions we ever get to the Good News of the Gospel. *“Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand.”* Most of Christendom has reduced this down to a mere shadow of its true meaning. To be sure, if we have done something wrong, we need to be sorry, we need to try to make amends, and we need to realign our lives with a better way to behave. While this is important to us

and to our relationships in many ways, it obscures a much larger principle. *Nobody* ever comes into the Christian Life except by way of repentance.

It is everywhere in our teachings. Repentance means to turn toward a New WAY – to turn in a new and different direction. We cannot die with Christ in the waters of baptism and come back out into the same old way of life. It doesn't make any difference whether our deeds were good, bad, mediocre, or just pathetic; the real issue is that our lives are under new management. We were in control of what we were doing and deciding, and even of what we were deciding was a good and right and proper way to live. Repentance means we have turned *away* from that way of life and turned *to* a new understanding of what our lives are about.

After my second major conversion, my father often approved of the things I was doing. He sometimes expressed concern for the trouble it was getting me into, but mostly he said he was proud of me. I really liked it when he approved of me and was proud of me. But it did not matter any longer. I was not living for his approval any longer. I had repented. You understand? I know that many of you do. More and more, if we have not done so already, we must reconnect with each other on the basis of our loyalty to Jesus. We are not trying to please each other; we are not trying to please anybody else – just Jesus. But drawn into this *ecclesia* – this fellowship of those who want to obey the guidance of the Holy Spirit – we are trying *along with each other* to please Jesus in our fellowship as believers. And that requires a huge repentance. That is, it is a very different WAY from the way of the world around us. And it is going to rework a lot of our habitual assumptions and reactions. It is possible (even probable), for instance, that you may choose a course of action that I do not personally like – a choice that means we do not get to see each other as much for a while, or that even has us working at what looks like cross-purposes for a while. But if I realize that you are doing what the Spirit wants you to be doing, then I rejoice, and my own personal stake in the matter and my own personal preferences are of no significance.

But back to the tougher issue: How can Jesus help us if we insist on rejecting His help? If we do not trust Jesus enough to prefer His opinions and instructions over our own, then we cannot have the Life He offers. Did God send his Son because there are no issues or problems here? Did God send his Son merely to tell us we should go

on doing everything the way we are already doing it? “But I try so hard, and I mean so well, and my character and morals are better than those of most of the people around me.” Well, that may be true. But it still got Jesus crucified. Don’t we know that Pilate and Herod and Caiaphas and the whole Jewish Sanhedrin were doing the best *they* could and making the same claims? Peter was head and shoulders above them, from our perspective, but he still heard the rooster’s cry. And it caused him to do what? TO REPENT. Not just to feel sorry for some behavioral lapse or mistake, but to choose a whole different WAY of Life! Trying to get along in this world the way it is caused Peter to deny Jesus. But for Peter, that came in the category of “Tried it once – didn’t like it.” Through years of severe trials and threats and close calls and even fights with his friends, to the best of our knowledge Peter never did that ever again. He may have made some blunders and mistakes, but he never denied his Lord ever again. And so Peter ended up crucified upside down. So you see, if we just pray sincerely and follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit, our lives will turn out to be pleasant, easy, and successful. That was *never* the promise or the purpose! Yet we *will* end up head over heels in love with Jesus, and there are many dimensions of His Kingdom still awaiting us.

Have we truly repented? What have we signed up for? Why are we trying to make this church strong again? Don’t we want our children to have pleasant, successful lives? Do we really hope and pray that *they* will repent? Do we even want them to know that *we* have?

Yesterday we had a memorial service for Dawna Finley, a dear friend of Rodger’s. It has no place in this service, I suppose, but I don’t have to play by all the rules anymore. I knew Dawna, in passing, years ago. There was something very winsome and tragic and sweet about her. Trying to get ready for the memorial service, I discovered that she was not only a Virgo, but that her chart was loaded with Virgo energy. There are always two sides to every sign, just like there are two sides to a coin. Virgo embodies the full spectrum of being “critical and analytical.” One end of criticism sees only the flaws. The other end of criticism sees the potential and all the possibilities. Sometimes “criticism” says, “Wow, that was truly wonderful.” Like the choir was truly wonderful yesterday, and so was the flutist. And Rodger sang and played like an angel.

Anyway, in Greek mythology, Virgo was the last one to give up on humans at the turning of the age, when humans forgot to honor their gods. But then it turned, and Virgo became the most disillusioned and bitter of all. She ended up sitting at the foot of the throne of Zeus, surveying the world below and watching for the flaws and errors of humans so she could tell Zeus where to aim his thunderbolts. It is the Greek version of Lucifer, in a way. Perhaps it is the Greek version of all of us when we get tired and discouraged about God's slow and patient process of redemption. Even so, the higher expression of Virgo energy still learns to reduce vast principles down to bite-size problems and then go on working for the improvements that are possible. "One day at a time," as some of us have learned to try to do. If we cannot discover some way to work at the little good set before us and quit trying to save the whole world all at once, we get completely overwhelmed and turn negative, like Virgo did.

But Dawna also reminded me of what it really means if we do not repent. I'm not talking about making some tiny little vow to improve our behavior, with us still in charge. Dawna needed to stop drinking. But that is only the tip of the iceberg. It is easy to stop drinking. I have done it hundreds of times. I often did it in the morning and stayed sober all day long. Sometimes I wouldn't drink for three or four days in a row. Once I even took a vow – and kept it – not to drink at all for six months. I had to prove to myself that I was not an alcoholic. So I proved it. How very impressive! But there was no true repentance, so I did not find a new or different WAY. It did not change my life one whit.

Is it the same with a lot of us when we claim conversion? We turn will and life over to the Holy Spirit of Jesus in the morning, and don't take things back into our own hands until hours later. How can we find a true repentance, one that really sinks in and says and means: "My life is yours, Lord"? Repent, for the Messiah of God has really come. We turn to a new Life, because God's Kingdom really is open to us right now. Only, if it does not stick – if it does not stay true for us day after day – the Spirit can never get us more than a few inches past where we started.

No doubt that sounds like scolding to some of you. But you know what? I hated my life as an alcoholic. Not at first, of course, but it ended up being horrible. Though often I told myself it was wonderful at the time, it was bad and getting worse. And never mind the obvious and overt problems that kept getting harder and harder

to deal with and to cover up. *Underneath*, life was getting lonelier and more isolated and harder and harder to bear. Jesus never abandoned me, but the communication kept getting thinner, and the pleasure of our relationship was getting more troubled all the time. Oh, I hated my life as an alcoholic, but there is something I hate even more: I do not like my life when I turn away from the guidance of the Holy Spirit; when I stop wanting to please God; when I try to run my life according to my own idea of what is right and good and true. *That* life also gets lonelier and more isolated and harder and harder to bear. I never really know what's good for me, never mind what's really good for anybody else. I love being in the presence of Jesus, who truly loves all of us way beyond anything we can see or know. In comparison to that, getting what I want – having things my own way – is sick and sad and sorrowful indeed.

So at times I still complain. I do not like all the disciplines of forgiveness and support and believing in people, or the controversy it keeps getting me into. I do not always like having to care about the church or tithing or knowing I can never go to bed at night without thinking I should have found a way to do more. But I like my own life – and doing it my own way – far less.

It is easy to give up drinking. It is easy to convert and become a Christian. But getting it to stick, day in and day out – to really *want* a different Life, to repent, to turn our whole will to a new and different WAY – is *never* easy, yet it is beautiful. And of course it has to be one day at a time. And it also means finding a Savior who is just as patient, persistent, constant, and determined as any of the temptations and distractions that continually try to draw us off course. Jesus is wondrous indeed when we finally realize that He is truly with us always – if we will allow it. He is never the one who gives up and walks away.

Popular wisdom is telling us today that we can be spiritual without being religious. That is, we can be sober but we do not have to stop drinking. We can love and honor Jesus, but we do not have to have any concern or loyalty for His church – that is, no concern or commitment to His mission on earth. We can talk a lot about “love,” but we can leave allegiance and discipline and an obedient relationship with God to a later time and place. And we can still be just as righteous – reconciled, forgiven – and commendable in God's eyes as any sincere Christian who is part of a faith community, who prays every day, and who seeks the will of God for his or her own life on a daily basis.

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Is that really true? Most of the society around us is willing to swear that it is true. And they support this claim by the way they live. Maybe that really seems true to some people, but it is not and does not seem true for me. None of my experience bears it out. All of us are working on one side of this equation or the other. And while that is neither the point nor the purpose of our love for Jesus, our lives do bear witness to the truths they proclaim – one way or the other.