

Sermon: Choose

New North Church, Hingham

Rev. Steven M. Aucella

12 February 2023

Based on **Sirach 15:15-20; Matthew 5:21-37**

A man named Jesus, son of Eleazar son of Sirach, commonly called Ben Sira, wrote and taught in Jerusalem a few hundred years before the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, son of Joseph. We have heard from Ben Sira before, and his wisdom remains relevant.

He wrote, ‘If you *choose*, you can keep the commandments, and to act faithfully is a matter of your own *choice*.’

In Deuteronomy, Moses said, ‘*Choose* life so that you and your descendants may live, *loving* the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him’ (30:19-20).

The Hebrew word translated here as *choose* means committing to a purpose in a relationship, and the care and attention paid in making that commitment. Ben Sira and Moses were both talking about making a life-long commitment to obey and serve God.

God chose Israel – to be his people.

God chose the place for Israel to worship – Jerusalem and the Temple.

God chose Aaron and his sons – to serve as priests.

God chose David – to be king. And God has chosen to let us choose God.

Ben Sira also wrote that the Lord’s eyes ‘are on those who fear him.’ Our modern-day ears hear the word *fear* in one way, but the Bible writers meant it in a different way: when one ‘fears the Lord,’ it means one is aware of God’s presence. And being aware of God is the beginning of wisdom. The thinking went that a wise person would of course choose God; who wouldn’t?

But these days, choosing God is not a given for many people. Are we any less wise than God’s people were two thousand years ago?

We make choices every day, of course; what to have for dinner, and so on. But often, we can’t choose, simply because there are too many choices.

Back in the Eighties, I worked briefly with a woman from the Soviet Union. After just a few months, she went back because she was overwhelmed by the number of

decisions she had to make every day. We saw that inability to decide in several Soviet emigrants back then. Wandering through the produce section in a supermarket could be debilitating for them. They were more comfortable when decisions were made for them. That was the system they knew best and were most comfortable with.

Sometimes, the choice is removed from us. Drug addiction or being caught in an abusive relationship can feel like a perpetual trap with no way out. We wouldn't choose to be trapped, but things happen, and we end up feeling as if we're locked in place.

We can choose to keep the commandments but choosing between life and death is another prospect entirely. What kind of life can we choose if we happen to live in a war zone? Or if you have to choose between buying dinner for your family or using that money to put gas in the truck so you can go to work in the morning?

It comes down to which life we're talking about, and which death. Life with God is not the same as life as we may know it on a day-to-day basis.

So, with all these problems and decisions to contend with and wrestle with, and hopefully overcome, we turn to Scripture for help. When things are bad, we choose God.

Our Gospel reading continues the Sermon on the Mount, which Jesus began a few weeks ago with the Beatitudes, spoken to the disciples. The 'blessed' were those fortunate ones whose attitudes and activities would diverge from the various cultures found throughout the Roman world.

Some scholars call the Sermon on the Mount a model for a so-called *contrast community*, which is a community that lives for the kingdom of heaven. Such a community does not accept the way things are and works to make things the way they ought to be, according to what God wants for us; they live humbly and with compassion for the poor. Essentially, the community lives in contrast to the world, hence the name.

Last week, Jesus taught his disciples, which includes us, how to live *for* the world. A Christian contrast community did not have to *become* salt or light; they were salt and light *already*. Salt improves flavor and light removes darkness.

In short, Jesus said, 'You have a mission and a purpose; do your job.'

Today, the Sermon continues as Jesus focuses on working to make right relationships. Some call this section 'the hard words of Jesus,' and they're not wrong. They are at best difficult.

The Law, meaning the Torah, the law of God as revealed to Moses, is the Law, and Jesus came to fulfill it, not to abolish it (5:17). And he will fulfill it with radical love.

In this section, Jesus calls out five bad behaviors one should avoid, beginning with the worst, which is murder, followed by anger; adultery; divorce; and swearing falsely. There are more in the next section, and they each cause hurt and harm to another (especially murder, which is irrevocable).

In each instance, Jesus restates and alters the Law, sometimes radically.

Murder isn't the problem; it's the result. *Anger* is a root cause of murder, so they're connected. Jesus calls us to avoid habitual anger; he says to nip it in the bud. Instead, he preaches reconciliation, which helps keep the community together as one. It will also keep you out of jail if you can't reconcile a debt, which raises the question of how you pay off a debt from prison.

Jesus' view on adultery sometimes hurts our modern ears, but his intention is to protect the woman, since a divorced woman was on her own. He also puts a lot of responsibility on the man in the relationship. Which is worse, forcing a woman to remain in an abusive marriage, or to be left alone with no income and no family? These days, we have options that didn't exist in the first century, but back then, if you were on the outside, you were vulnerable.

As it was, Jesus had taken a more extreme position than even the most conservative rabbis and ended up being more radical than anyone. No one in Jesus' time would have agreed that a man might commit adultery against his wife. It just wasn't possible. But Jesus said, no, it's a two-way street. His was a new and almost dangerous teaching. It unsettled the status quo and made people nervous. But it fulfilled the Law.

His idea of radical love forces us to commit to *telling the truth*. Honest speech is the foundation for trustworthy relationships. Each example given by Jesus describes a broken relationship. Jesus says repair the relationship before you do something drastic. He's demanding more from us than even the Law commands.

As a faith community and as individuals, we're not always kind, we're not always honest, and marriages sometimes fail. We're only human, as we prove again and again, but that's no excuse.

We expect Scripture and Jesus' teachings to inform and shape our conduct. This is one reason why we come to church. In times of rapid social change, or when we're in the midst of a personal crisis, or when we're under pressure to make a life-altering decision, it is then when we most need God's guidance.

Moses set before us life and prosperity in *choosing* to live in covenant with God (Deuteronomy 30:15).

Sirach said that God has not commanded anyone to be wicked; we decide that for ourselves. And Jesus said commit yourself to the Torah, as did 'those of ancient times.'

So, again, it all boils down to *choosing* to 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might,' to live in harmony with your neighbor, and to love them as you love yourself.

And while we're at it, walk humbly with the Lord; and let your word be 'Yes.'
Amen.