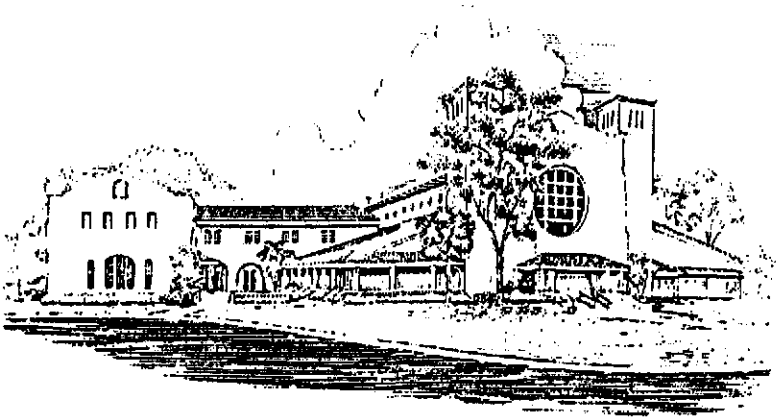


First Church Pulpit

**"WHICH WAY SHALL I GO? —
A Sermon for the Young and Young at Heart"**

Text: ". . . Choose this day whom you will serve!"

— Joshua 24:15



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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FEBRUARY 25, 1990

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Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, 1990

There are many ways to simplify, or some would say oversimplify, what it takes to live a good and holy life. I mean a life that is good and useful, happy, and successful. Over the years I, as you, have heard a variety of little slogans, which reduce that search simply to: "Do this, and you will find success", or "Do that, and life will be easy." "Think positive, and everything will be O.K." "Seven Steps to Happiness." I had one of my custodians at a former church bring me a little booklet called: "Five Easy Lessons to Be a Good Preacher". He was ready to take over, I guess.

Others have said: "Learn to win friends and influence people", and you will be successful. Even "Follow the Good Book." You know what I mean? Someone is always trying to tell you how to live a happy life, and making money selling you the book. I am not much for those easy solutions. I have found life to be difficult. I find living up to the best I want to be a full-time job. I find that I often fail.

I am treading on thin ice this morning, thinner than usual, for a pastor always must tread on thin ice, the Word of God can get you into trouble. As Carlyle Marny once wrote: "The preacher should stutter, so great is his task." The thin ice today is that, after thirty years of ministry, I offer you today my own simple little slogan, as it were. It is this: The good and successful, happy, holy life is simply a matter of making the right decisions. Did you hear me? The

good life is mainly a matter of making the right decisions, and once having made them, keeping with them. Simple? (Ho-hum, I have heard that before....) Let us look a little deeper into making decisions.

I have learned, and I want you to think with me throughout this whole process, that people go about making decisions in a variety of ways. Some, sadly, decide by doing nothing. I guess they assume that the problem will go away. I mean, in little things, like what to do this morning, and in large things, like what to do with Jesus Christ. They just keep procrastinating, postponing it to another day: "Someday I am going to decide what to do about that." Someday.... But "someday" never comes. I call it "Management by Avoidance". Those people remain, in my experience, indecisive and largely unhappy.

Other people always take the easy choice. Whatever happens, they select the choice with the minimum of fuss and bother at the time...the easy way. Many parents and bosses do that. It is a lot easier just to skip over misbehavior in your child, rather than cause a fuss. So, we take the easy way out, we just let it go. It is a lot easier not to go up to a friend and say: "Hey, you are making a sorry mess of your life, I love you, and I want you to change it." People do not like you to say that, so it is easier not to. Right? Not only parents and bosses and friends, but all the rest of us too. Life is more pleasant when you do not trouble the waters.

My first boss was a wonderful man. He was tough. I had made a dreadful mistake one day, and he knew it. I knew it, too, and I told him I was sorry. He said: "You should be." But then, he said something I have never forgotten, and which I have passed along to my children, and anyone else who would listen to me. He said: "Richard, always remember that the only one who never makes a mistake is the one who does nothing." You can avoid mistakes...just don't do anything; but life is overlooked in the process.

Bill Coffin said it similarly, the former pastor of Riverside Church, now in a Peace Project in Washington. Concerning congregations, Dr.Coffin wrote: "The church which decides to get involved in controversial issues is sometimes wrong. The church that never gets involved is always wrong!" Some people take the easy choice, to be nice and to win friends, and take life as it comes. Do you know what I mean?

There is another group of people, however, in my experience, who make decisions by instinct. That is, they really do not know, but decide by what they feel to be right at the time. Often, if they are blessed with good common sense, and good instinctual powers, they make good decisions. Sometimes they do not. But they never think about it in the sense that they never have decided where they are trying to get when they make the next

decision, and so they are at the mercy of what their instinct tells them at the moment. Do you know people like that? They are fun to be with. Spontaneity is a gift. But, they often fail at the end.

There are others, who make decisions on a pre-set pattern and plan, almost as if a program had been prepared for their computers. They determine exactly where they want to go, and their decisions, all of the various alternatives, inevitably are related to this goal and dream. That is all right. That is cerebral. They think it through.

I will tell you a funny story in that regard about Charles Darwin, the founder of evolution, who wrote "The Origin of the Species" in 1858. Darwin was a very active naturalist and scientist. He traveled the world, of course, in search of answers. One day, at the time he reached his middle twenties, he thought that he better decide soon whether he should, or should not get married. He did not go by instinct or by avoidance. He got his big brain working, and he wrote down seven reasons why he should get married. Then, he wrote down seven or so reasons why he should not. He weighed each one against the other (That can be a good way to make a decision). But, poor Charles, he came to a negative decision. He would not get married, for he was called to a higher vocation.

The only problem was that two months later, as he went to a dinner party, Emma was sitting across the room. He fell in love on sight. He begged her and begged her to marry him. She did, and she was a good and faithful wife all his days.

(By the way, an interesting story, it is not in my manuscript, but Darwin's wife was a Bible-believing evangelical Christian, and she did not believe in evolution. That must have been difficult, because all over the country in the 1860's almost every minister in England was condemning Charles Darwin. She was in church every Sunday morning. She believed in the faith. But, she also believed in her husband. [You wives, are you listening?] And even though she thought him wrong, always in public she defended him. That is nice.)

To move along, others make decisions on what I would call selfish interest, on the basis of what they have to gain for themselves at the moment. It is not as diabolical as it sounds, they are built that way. You can predict that when they decide, it is because they feel there is something in it for them. Seeking pleasure, they often find it, for the present anyway. As the little boy said when he fell off the swing in the yard and broke his arm: "It was great...until I hit the ground."

Others, and far too many at any age, make decisions on the basis of what is popular among their friends. Dying to gain acceptance, they go along with the crowd. Even then - to tell the truth - many of them do not become popular, but based on a preconception that the only way to be happy is not to go against your friends and fellow travelers, they sacrifice their own individuality to the group. That is sad! I warn you of it here.

Some people always seem to make the wrong decisions. I mean, one bad investment, then another, one bad relationship, then another, one mistake, then another. Poor things, I pity them. Part of the reason has to do with a lot of what I have mentioned already. They are not responsible, I guess, they just do it.

There was a little boy like that in school. He was always in trouble. He was thrown out of class one day, and went to home to his father. His father thought that it was about time to talk to his son. He said: "Now, Tommy, you have to learn to be responsible!" Little Tommy said: "Responsible, Dad?.... I am responsible.... Every time something happens up there, they say: 'Tommy is responsible!'"

A retired Navy captain told me about the process used in the United States Navy selecting their top officers, say the captain of a ship. They scour the records and the recommendations, of

course. Then they have the personal interview. After that, the candidate is dismissed. Those in charge of the selection sit around and ask themselves one question: "Does this man have good judgment?" And if he does, he passes, and if he does not, he doesn't. I know people with everything, but they have bad judgment. They make the wrong decisions, and they end up ruining their lives, and the lives of those around them.

Now, let's turn the page to you. I wonder if you could describe for me what lies behind your own decision-making process. Did you find yourself in any of the groups I have mentioned? Most people I have cross-examined, friends and acquaintances, really do not know. I encourage especially some of you young people to peer into your heart and mind and soul, and find out how it is, what prompts you to do certain things, especially things harmful to you and those you love.

Because, as modern psychology says, and the Bible confirms: you know. The decision-making process is not haphazard. Sigmund Freud wrote that only ten percent of what we use to make decisions is on the surface, but like an iceberg, ninety percent of it is submerged. It is in the subconscious, but it is there. There is a pattern. It is not random. It is not haphazard. There is a reason for every decision we make. I encourage you to find out what yours are.

I am about to suggest a final pattern to you, which brings us to the story of Joshua in Chapter 24. Joshua was a marvelous man. He had been a personal attendant to Moses. A very positive thinker, and a great military leader, although he, too, made some mistakes. Joshua and Caleb brought back a good report from their scouting trip to the Promised Land. The other ten scouts (spies) said: "We'll never take that land." Joshua said: "But...God wants us to have that land. We must conquer it, and we will." He, too, had a pre-set program: what God wanted was what he wanted to do. The tribes tried to stone him to death. They did not want to risk battle. But, you always have to fight for anything that is worthwhile, right?

Joshua was chosen by Moses to take his place. That was a high honor. There were other candidates. We have to commend Joshua: as long as Moses was alive, he did not try to take charge. (It must have been a temptation, as Moses aged.) Then, after Moses died, he laid out a plan, and they did, in fact, conquer the Promised Land. It was a struggle, but they did it. Now...by the time we get to our story, Joshua was well advanced in years.

He called all the people together at Shechem, a lovely city by the way, just north of Jerusalem. It would have been like Washington, D.C., or the Plymouth Rock of our nation. It was where it all started with Abraham. It was the town where the

Patriarchs were buried. It was a place of holiness. A temple was there. All were assembled: elders, judges, priests, the people, even the little children came. Joshua began: "I want to talk to you now that I am about to depart this earth. I want to remind you of all the wonderful things that God has done for His world. I want to tell you about all the wonderful things He has done for us, from Abraham on, through Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses.... God was on our side, even when we were unfaithful to Him. I want to tell you about it, and then I want to make a charge to you. I want to charge you to be faithful to that God, who led us this far. And, as we settle in the new land, do not forget it was God who led us there."

Then the people answered, in my mimicry at least: "Oh, sure, Joshua, we will be very, very, very glad to follow God. He is the God of our fathers, and we will follow Him." But Joshua said: "Wait a minute. I know you have not thought it through. You do not really intend to follow God. You intend to follow Him as long as it is convenient, as long as you have something to get out of it. But when He calls on you for some major sacrifice, I know you people, you will forget Him. If you be unwilling to serve the Lord, and give Him first place in your heart, then choose this day whom you will serve." And he ended: "As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord."

You see what was happening? He was reminding them of casual religion, of

religion based on convenience, on "what it can give to me." I want to tell you, Christian people, there are many who need to hear that message. There are too many casual Christians. They like the holidays. They like a wonderful choir. They like a beautiful Sanctuary. But, deep down, when it comes to commitment to Christ, they need to listen to Joshua. Because, and this is the scary part, Joshua goes on to say: "If you forsake God, and break your promise" (I am reading) "He will do you harm." Did you hear that? If you break the promise, it is right there, God will do you harm.

St. Paul rephrased it simply for people who farm: "You reap what you sow." You put oats in, oats come up. You put corn in, corn comes up. You put evil in the ground, and evil comes up. Koheleth, the author of Ecclesiastes, says it even better: "It is better to not vow," he said, "better never to make the vow, than to vow and not pay." Revelation caps it all in graphic language. John writes: "If you are lukewarm with Jesus, He will spew you out of His mouth." Make sure you mean it. Deal trivially with God, and He will deal trivially with you.

Now, the last point. Just in case you missed what I said, I want to apply it very briefly to a certain specific set of examples, or illustrations. Some of you are in school. I speak to you, and to all. You start a new term, and you say: "Boy, I am going to get it this time! I will study every night,

I will do every paper on time, so that when the final comes, I am going to be ready." (I warn my daughters of this all the time, as I remember my father warning me.) But then, you find some exciting new things to do: "After all, it is basketball season, Dad, I've got to go to the game!" Sure.... Or: "I want to go to the Mardi Gras". Sure.... You keep postponing it, and as you flunk the final, you say: "Oh, my goodness, whatever happened to me? I prayed that God will help me!" You know what happened. You made bad choices throughout the term, a series of bad decisions, conscious decisions. You are responsible for you.

Suppose you apply it to your personal life for a moment, say, those of you who are married. Now, I know there are mysteries in marriage. Joshua never said that when harm comes to you, it is God punishing you. He did not say that. There are mysteries as to why things happen sometimes. Sometimes it is surely not God's punishment. But basically, as Browning said, life gives you back just what you ask for. Jesus said: "Seek, and you will find." There are basically very few surprises. In marriage, you promise at the wedding altar to do some things. Right? That you will love him or her as Christ loved His Church, the ceremony says, totally.... You will be forgiving, kind, you will grow together. You will care for each other. And then...some years later, one or the other says: "Oh, dear, we do not have

a marriage any more. We live together, but it is not a marriage any more...." What happened? I tell you what happened. You have made a lot of conscious choices. You chose to get busy with your work. You chose to ignore each other. You chose not to communicate. You chose to be unfaithful. You chose to be silent. You chose...it was a deliberate choice every day of your life...a decision. And if you make the wrong choices, then you do yourself harm.

I have a friend in Connecticut, I love him and talk to him a lot. This is a little personal, but I hope you do not mind. I have been trying to get him to take his faith more seriously. I have been after him for thirty years to read his Bible. Four or five months ago I asked: "How are you doing with the Bible, Bob?" (That is not his name.) He said: "Oh, I got as far as Genesis Six!" (If you know the Bible, you know that is not very far.) Next, he tore off a joke that was as funny as could be. It was a little off-color, but you know, that is up to him. I laughed, mockingly scolded him, and asked: "Where did you ever hear that?" He said: "It was in my Playboy Magazine. As you know, I read it cover to cover every month." Now, that might not be a mortal sin (Smile). But, fill your mind with trash, and as they say in Computer-ville: "Garbage in, garbage out!" You want to soil your whole system? Do it.

The point I am making is that here, as everywhere, we make specific choices

every passing day. In matters of personal health, the same is true. We all know what is good for life. We all know it is bad to drink too much, smoke too much, eat too much, to be angry, to be stressful.... The point I am making, in case you did not get it, is that every time you light a cigarette, it is a conscious choice. Every time you have an extra drink, it is a conscious choice. Every time you pollute the body which God gave you, you have made a bad decision. Finally the time comes, when the doctor says: "I am sorry."

Well, lastly, in case I missed anybody...(Did I miss anybody at all? Please raise your hand)...in case I missed anyone, take it real quietly and briefly to the inner chambers of your own spiritual life. Is Christ your ruler there? Is He in charge of you? Does this little preset program in your head for decision-making ever come up and say: "What would Christ want me to do? Have I really opened up my heart, so that He can enter there, so that He is at the point of control?"

Remember that famous Holman Hunt painting of Christ knocking at the door? Have you ever seen it? It is a cottage in the wood. He is outside with a lantern, knocking. Last week, I read a little story about it. The father was showing the painting to his little daughter, say, age ten. After a while, she asked him: "What happened next, Daddy? Did they ever

open the door?"

Christ was knocking at the door. He is knocking at your door...and mine. All you have to do is open it. If you don't, He will not come in. So make that decision, and stick with it, and you will be happy all the days of your life. For if you love Him, why not serve Him? If you love Him, why not serve Him? For now and evermore. Amen.