

Gaines Congregational United Church of Christ

February 12, 2023

Old Testament Reading; Deuteronomy 30: 15-20

Responsive Reading; Psalm 119: 1-8

Epistle Reading; 1 Corinthians 3: 1-9

Gospel Reading; Matthew 5: 21-37

Sermon Title: **Choose Life**

By Rev. Jim Gardner

Summary; Do it your way and be One vs God or, do it God's way and be One with God.

Our Old Testament lesson for today says, "I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore, choose life, that both you and your descendants may live."

Two weeks ago, in my message I said that getting into heaven was not hard, it was the easiest thing in the world. I then went on to quote Romans 10: 9-13 where it says, "If you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the

heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation, for the Scripture says, “Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame...for Whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

At first reading you might well think that the gospel lesson of today makes me out to be unaware at best and a liar at worst.

The truth of the matter is that this gospel does not refute Romans, but rather sets the stage for what Paul says in that Epistle.

One of our problems with Bible study is that we often try to lift a complex concept out of a short section or collection of verses. We often fail to recognize that the total teaching often depends on what was said before or after the section we are reading. We also have to realize to whom this passage is directed. Jesus addressed His disciples differently than He addressed the Scribes and Pharisees.

Four verses before the start of today’s gospel Jesus says to those being influenced by strict interpreters of the law, “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled. Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches men to do so, shall be called the least in the kingdom of

heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven.”

If you are going to enter the Kingdom of Heaven by good works, you will have to be more righteous than the scribes and Pharisees are.

Hay, wait a second, the Scribes and the Pharisees were the most righteous people in all of Judaism. How could anyone be more righteous than they?

That is just the point. All the righteousness they could conjure up could not even come close to being good enough to get to heaven by good works. God is perfect, and only those who are perfect can share His kingdom. Jesus even said that just the thought of committing murder would be a serious character flaw. For a man to do a double take when a pretty woman walked by would be equivalent to committing adultery. He also criticized the person who “swears on a stack of bibles” because if he were good, people would believe his yes to be yes and his no to be no. This is an impossible standard. No human can achieve perfection.

It is not HARD to get to heaven by good works. It is IMPOSSIBLE.

No human can achieve perfection, but all humans can receive perfection as a gift from Jesus Christ.

Wow! That sounds radical. But think about it.

If that cannot happen why did Jesus die on the cross? Jesus died that we might live. Jesus took all of our sins, from the greatest to the least upon Himself that He might give us His righteousness, i.e. perfection, so that we could join Him and His Father in His Father's Kingdom.

This speaks to grace, not works, as being our route to salvation and can bring up another sticky point. If we are saved by the grace of Jesus dying in our place does that mean we can do what ever we want and not be responsible for our actions? Heck no. In Romans 6: 14 -16 Paul says, "For sin shall not have dominion over you, for you are not under law but under grace. What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? Certainly not! Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness?"

This means that if God brings you into His family you do not slap Him in the face but you really try to do what pleases Him, even if that will not be perfect all the time.

In our Epistle, Paul said we should give credit where credit is due. Paul speaks of ministry in this way, “Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one? I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase.”

To God be the glory!

Deuteronomy gives God the Glory. Moses, the reported author of this book says, “...you and your descendants may live; that you may love the Lord your God, that you may obey His voice, and that you may cling to Him, for He is your life and the length of your days.” Moses says, “cling to God for He is your life”. Moses does not say that it is all on you. Moses emphasizes that to have life you must CLING to God.

Our Psalm encourages us to do our best to follow the precepts of God but recognizes that we will fall short when he says, “Oh do not forsake me utterly!” or to say it another way, “God, I’m going to try, but when I screw up please give me another chance.”

Finally, Jesus said in John 14, “I am THE way, THE truth and THE life. No-one cometh unto the Father but through me.” “Choose life, that both you and your descendants may live.”

Hallelujah and Amen!