

Only God  
February 13, 2011

State College Presbyterian Church  
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## ONLY GOD

In preparing for this sermon today I read a story which just wouldn't let me go - I kept thinking about it. To me it is an extraordinary story - and also one that speaks to the challenge of choosing life - as the text in Deut. speaks of. Let me share it with you.

Michael was the kind of guy who had such a positive outlook that you either loved him or hated him. When someone would ask him how he was doing, he would reply, "If I were any better, I would be twins!"

A friend asked how he could be so positive all the time. Michael replied, "Each morning I wake up and say to myself, 'You have two choices today. You can choose to be in a good mood or ... you can choose to be in a bad mood.' I choose to be in a good mood. Each time something bad happens, I can choose to be a victim or ... I can choose to learn from it. I choose to learn from it. "

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The friend protested that even though it sounded great in theory it would be hard to live out. Michael responded, "Life is all about choices. When you cut away all the junk, every situation is a choice. You choose how you react to situations. You choose how people affect your mood. You choose to be in a good mood or bad mood. The bottom line: It's your choice how you live your life."

Several years later, Michael was involved in a serious accident as he fell sixty feet from a communications tower. The paramedics arrived and went to work. They kept telling Michael that he was going to be fine. But when they wheeled him into the ER, he saw the expressions on the faces of the doctors and nurses.

A big burly nurse was shouting questions. She asked Michael if he was allergic to anything. He replied, "Yes." The doctors and nurses stopped

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working as they waited for Michael to fill in the missing blank of his allergy. He took a deep breath and yelled, "Gravity." Over their laughter, he said, "I am choosing to live. Operate on me with that understanding."

After eighteen hours of surgery and weeks of intensive care, Michael was released from the hospital with rods placed in his back. Michael lived, thanks to the skill of his doctors, and also because of his amazing attitude. When asked about his health, Michael would respond, "If I were any better, I'd be twins."

Now there are parts of that story I really question. Can a person suffering from depression or a disabling illness simply choose to be positive or life affirming? I don't think that is always true.

Sometimes there are biological reasons that are hard to overcome simply by choosing to look at the positive side of life.

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What I liked about the story, however, was the reminder that we often CAN choose how we are going to respond. Like Michael in the story, we think about and decide how we are going to respond, rather than simply reacting to a situation. If we begin to practice that in small things, we may find ourselves able to choose life and health and peace over the negative.

So far this may sound to you like a lecture on pop psychology - but I want to suggest it is far more than that. I think it is a lesson in faith - and that is part of the reason Michael's story kept coming to me through my preparation.

The passage I read from Deuteronomy may sound like one of those troubling blessing/cursing sections in the Bible. It can sound a lot like the gospel (small g on that gospel) of prosperity - do what God wants and you will receive wealth and happiness. I'll grant to you that those are both elements of this passage, with which we must wrestle....at some other time.

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This week I want to look at the verbs in the first part of verse 16

<sup>16</sup>If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments

obey the commandments

loving the Lord

walking in God's ways

observing/guarding/keeping God's commandments.

I want you to notice a couple of things here. Obeying (a word we only really like when we are parents) is defined by the next three verbs -

To obey is to love, to walk in God's way, and to follow/observe/guard

God's commandments. These are not separate activities. Rather they

are different ways of expressing your basic commitment to God. To

love God is to walk in his paths and to observe (keep, guard) his word.

Walking and keeping are ways to define how the people are to love God.

Observing, or guarding God's word is a way of loving God. Loving God

results in observing God's words. Loving God is not to be just an

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emotion or even an experience of the past, but is to be lived out in all of life, both now and in the future.

This is the way Deuteronomy wants us to choose - the way that leads to life. Abundant life is how Jesus talked about this very same thing.

Following God in this way is not the blind obedience a younger child might give - it is the whole hearted commitment of an adult who knows where his or her allegiance lies.

The church in Corinth was following God slavishly, as though if you kept certain rules you were free to do anything else you liked. They were young in their commitment and didn't yet understand that loving God meant a lot more than keeping rules - loving God involves your whole self.

Now I don't know if Michael in the story was a believer or not. But he is showing all the signs of having matured. A mature person of faith knows how to put their life in God's hands in all kinds of situations.

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They are people who know how to trust God's way. The apostle Paul's maturity allowed him to say, I am content, no matter my circumstance.

A mature person of faith knows how to praise God in all situations of life. Deep experience in following God leads to a deep trust that God is at work in every situation of life, not in a passive way, but actively with intent to bring life out of death, and hope out of despair. That kind of deep trust makes it possible to endure the hospital bed, the chronic illness, the tensions at work. It is as if we would say I am going to act with faith in every situation. I am going to love God, to keep following God no matter what. This is no easy faith, but one that is hard won, and usually takes a lifetime to grow. It is a faith that has suffered and learned there is a way to walk with God through the good times and the bad. It is a faith that chooses life.