

Near the Cross 6: MAKING CHOICES
Mark 11:7-10, 15:6-13 (3/20/16)

Mark 11:7-10: 7 When they brought the colt to Jesus and threw their cloaks over it, he sat on it. 8 Many people spread their cloaks on the road, while others spread branches they had cut in the fields. 9 Those who went ahead and those who followed shouted,

"Hosanna!"

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

10 "Blessed is the coming kingdom of our father David!"

"Hosanna in the highest!"

-----**ANTHEM: HOSANNA! HOSANNA!**-----

Mark 15:6-13: Now it was the custom at the festival to release a prisoner whom the people requested. 7 A man called Barabbas was in prison with the insurrectionists who had committed murder in the uprising. 8 The crowd came up and asked Pilate to do for them what he usually did. 9 "Do you want me to release to you the king of the Jews?" asked Pilate, 10 knowing it was out of envy that the chief priests had handed Jesus over to him. 11 But the chief priests stirred up the crowd to have Pilate release Barabbas instead. 12 "What shall I do, then, with the one you call the king of the Jews?" Pilate asked them. 13 "Crucify him!" they shouted.

The nearer we get to the cross of Jesus, the more important it becomes for us to make choices concerning its meaning for us. There was much confusion about the cross in Jesus' day, and there continues to be confusion when we're faced with the cross of Jesus.

- 1) We have to decide whether the cross of Jesus is foolishness and a stumbling block, or is it the power and wisdom of God to save us.
- 2) Was Jesus' death just another crucifixion—they were common in that day--or was it the fulfillment of prophecy, and the culmination of what God had planned since before the foundation of the world?
- 3) Was Jesus a religious heretic and political traitor, or was He God in human flesh?

> These are some of the confusing choices we have to make as we draw ever nearer the cross of Jesus.

Roman soldiers actually nailed a sign to Jesus' cross that read, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews." It was not to be taken seriously, of course; and yet on Palm Sunday, Jesus was welcomed into Jerusalem as a king!

They waved palm branches and placed their coats in His path. They praised God and shouted, "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord." It was a fleeting moment, to be sure; but they gave Jesus the royal treatment. He was King for a day.

But the crowd quickly changed their tune when Jesus failed to do what they wanted. He refused to take up the sword. He made no attempt to expel the Roman invaders.

Jesus had no interest in a Kingdom with geographical boundaries. His Kingdom would be in the hearts of those who received Him by faith and followed Him as Savior and Lord.

So, public sentiment quickly turned against Him. Those who welcomed Jesus with praise and palm branches soon grew impatient and angry, and they called for his death. How dare He disappoint them!

1. The events of Holy Week demonstrate the choices people make concerning Jesus and His cross. "Long live the King," they shouted as He entered Jerusalem. But a few days later, this had changed to "He's no king. He's an impostor-- crucify him!"

How sad to think that we are so much like them—just as quick to be swept away by the popular tides of our day—the new fad, the new conspiracy, the new candidate...or whatever. We get caught up and swept away without ever taking time to think or pray or seriously consider the consequences of what we're doing—just like them.

It's always been easier to "go with the flow" than to stand our ground, and the flow which proclaimed Jesus as King quickly changed directions and swelled into a flood of angry voices calling for His death. So what could be done? They crucified Him.

For a while, they were captivated by Jesus. But soon, they were repulsed by Him—and that dichotomy continues. We still see those two diametrically opposed ways of responding to Jesus at work in our world today (i.e., being captivated / repulsed)

And God still demands that we choose whose side we're on. The Gospel says that in His love for us, the Heavenly Father set us free from sin, death, and hell through the cross of Jesus Christ. The world keeps insisting, though, that this can't be true—that the message of the cross is foolishness. So, again, we have choices to make.

2. But, then, so did Jesus. **Jesus had to choose whether to take up His cross**--the one assigned to Him by the Father. God knew His Son was the only One who would be able to carry it.

The burden of choosing what to do, though, was so heavy and heart-wrenching that the Bible says Jesus' sweat became like great drops of blood--as He prayed in the Garden—seeking the Father's will...and the strength to follow it.

Even as he hung on the cross, there were those who taunted Him, telling Him if there was any truth to His claims, *if* He really was the Messiah, He would save Himself and come down from the cross. Believe me—the temptation was real.

Jesus had to choose—all along this incredibly painful journey that took Him ever nearer the cross, Jesus had to choose whether to stay committed to the Father's will, to stay faithful to this plan to save a lost humanity, or NOT. He had options.

A. When the soldiers and the angry mob came to the garden to get Jesus, Peter drew His sword in defense; but Jesus told him to put it away. “Put your sword back in its place,’ Jesus said to him, ‘for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and He will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels?’” (Matthew 26:52)

Jesus was no helpless victim of circumstances. He deliberately moved in the direction of the cross. Earlier, when he “set His face toward Jerusalem,” he knew what was waiting for Him. He could have opted out at any point, but He didn’t.

Jesus was on a mission to do the Father’s will. “Not my will, but Thy will be done,” He prayed. Jesus chose the cross. He chose personal humiliation and pain and sacrifice. He chose us. This is what really matters—Jesus chose US!

B. The crowd mocked Him and said, “Save yourself.” The Heavenly Father said, “Deny yourself and save others,” which is what Jesus did. He bore our griefs and carried our sorrows, and in a way that we will never fully understand, God laid upon Him the iniquity of us all.

All our sin, our guilt, our alienation from God and from each other, was nailed to the cross with Jesus. He COULD have saved Himself. He chose instead to save US. And now whoever believes in Him, receiving Him by faith, will not perish but have eternal life.

This is the message of the cross. Have you chosen to accept it? Or does it offend you in some way? Do you find it repulsive—there are those who do—you may be among them.

Maybe you’ve heard it so much it bores you. Do you ever find a way to “tune out” whenever talk turns to Jesus and His cross? Listen—God finds that repulsive! He won’t let you ignore this!

3. So what will our choice be concerning Jesus and His cross? Listen to these words, please. We find them in Galatians 6:14—**“May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.”**

Isaac Watts paraphrased those words so powerfully when he wrote, **“Forbid it Lord that I should boast, save in the death of Christ, my God. All the vain things that charm me most, I sacrifice them to His blood.”**

Fanny Crosby said it a bit more simply: **“In the cross, in the cross, be my glory ever, Til my ransomed soul shall find rest beyond the river.”**

Watts and Crosby, like the Apostle Paul before them, and like millions of faithful followers of Christ down through the centuries, chose to glory in the message of Christ and His cross. Friends, either we GLORY in the cross, or we glory in something else.

Either we find peace with God, peace with ourselves and one another, through Christ’s atoning death on the cross, or we continue our desperate search for some semblance of peace among the charming, but vain things, the ultimately empty things, of this world.

We glory in what’s important to us. What’s important to us is that which gives our lives meaning and substance and purposefulness. This is the universal quest of humankind: life that is meaningful.

The world charms us by what it has to offer—it always has; but it keeps finding ways to multiply its charms and make them ever more enticing.

So the world keeps trying to convince us that life’s meaning can be found in things which are tangible—things which are desirable, and obtainable by our own efforts. It’s all right here for us, if we can just somehow wrap our arms around it!

How often have you fallen for this trap? You started believing that all you needed to be happy and fulfilled was to make a certain purchase, or land a particular promotion, or receive an honor you feel you deserve, or maybe end one relationship and start another, or...you name it. What's gotten you hooked?

So, you did it; but the happiness didn't last. The thrill was short-lived. Your piece of the pie wasn't as sweet as you thought it would be.

If you are like most folks, you quickly identified the problem and began to focus on something else that you were just as sure would do the trick for you. A different thing to buy, yet another relationship, an exotic trip—or something else that would finally fix your life!

How many times do we have to play that game before we realize that we always lose in the end? Some seem to play it over and over again, and never learn!

"Vain things that charm me most..." Did Watts get that right, or what? Why do we allow ourselves to be so captivated by stuff that ends up making us feel so lost and empty inside? Why do we let the "vain things" charm us so?

"May I never boast (or glory) except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world." (Galatians 6:14).

We boast, we glory in, that which makes life meaningful for us.

To find ultimate meaning, though, we must deal with ultimate reality, not the temporary things--the vain things--of the world. We have to come to grips with God—not some semblance of God that only wants to keep us happy and entertained—that's a God of our own making.

We must choose to humble ourselves before the God who gave up His Son to die for us, and tells us that we must die to ourselves,

especially that selfish side of us that insists it's somebody else's job to make us happy.

Then we can discover Jesus' way of living--living for others—dying for others, if need be—but first dying to self, so that we can live for Christ. This, friends, is what it means to be Christian!

In our kind of world, where we have so much, it's easy to lose our perspective on Jesus and His cross. Clarence Jordan, founder of Koinonia Farm in Americus, GA, and a strong advocate for the poor, tells this story. It's worth repeating.

Jordan was getting a tour of another minister's new church. It was furnished with the best of everything. When the two of them stepped outside, it was getting dark, and a spotlight was shining on a huge cross atop the steeple.

"That cross alone cost us \$10,000," the minister said. To which Jordan replied, "You got cheated. Times were when Christians could get them for free."

Kinda' puts things in perspective. Everything that Jesus did for you and me on the cross is still free—meaning we can never earn it or deserve it. We can only receive it by faith and with gratitude that's demonstrated through a life-long love for and obedience to our Lord.

It's free—but never easy. If we say "Yes" to Christ's invitation and choose to follow Him, there will be a cross for us; and we must take it up and follow Him with all we are and all we have.

This is the most important choice we'll ever make. Choosing Christ means life—full and abundant life—now and forever. I invite you to choose Christ today—don't put this decision off—choose to follow Christ Jesus now.