

### Deuteronomy 30

15 Look here! Today I've set before you life and what's good versus death and what's wrong. 16 If you obey the Lord your God's commandments that[a] I'm commanding you right now by loving the Lord your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments, his regulations, and his case laws, then you will live and thrive, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess. 17 But if your heart turns away and you refuse to listen, and so are misled, worshipping other gods and serving them, 18 I'm telling you right now that you will definitely die. You will not prolong your life on the fertile land that you are crossing the Jordan River to enter and possess. 19 I call heaven and earth as my witnesses against you right now: I have set life and death, blessing and curse before you. Now choose life—so that you and your descendants will live— 20 by loving the Lord your God, by obeying his voice, and by clinging to him. That's how you will survive and live long on the fertile land the Lord swore to give to your ancestors: to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

### Psalm 119

Those whose way is blameless—  
    who walk in the Lord's Instruction—are truly happy!  
2 Those who guard God's laws are truly happy!  
    They seek God with all their hearts.  
3 They don't even do anything wrong!  
    They walk in God's ways.  
4 God, you have ordered that your decrees  
    should be kept most carefully.  
5 How I wish my ways were strong  
    when it comes to keeping your statutes!  
6 Then I wouldn't be ashamed  
    when I examine all your commandments.  
7 I will give thanks to you with a heart that does right  
    as I learn your righteous rules.  
8 I will keep your statutes.  
    Please don't leave me all alone!

### 1 Corinthians 3

Brothers and sisters, I couldn't talk to you like spiritual people but like unspiritual people, like babies in Christ. 2 I gave you milk to drink instead of solid food, because you weren't up to it yet. 3 Now you are still not up to it because you are still unspiritual. When jealousy and fighting exist between you, aren't you unspiritual and living by human standards? 4 When someone says, "I belong to Paul," and someone else says, "I belong to Apollos," aren't you acting like people without the Spirit? 5 After all, what is Apollos? What is Paul? They are servants who helped you to believe. Each one had a role given to them by the Lord: 6 I planted, Apollos watered, but God made it grow. 7 Because of this, neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but the only one who is anything is God who makes it grow. 8 The one who

plants and the one who waters work together, but each one will receive their own reward for their own labor. 9 We are God's coworkers, and you are God's field, God's building.

#### Matthew 5

21 "You have heard that it was said to those who lived long ago, Don't commit murder,[a] and all who commit murder will be in danger of judgment. 22 But I say to you that everyone who is angry with their brother or sister will be in danger of judgment. If they say to their brother or sister, 'You idiot,' they will be in danger of being condemned by the governing council. And if they say, 'You fool,' they will be in danger of fiery hell. 23 Therefore, if you bring your gift to the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, 24 leave your gift at the altar and go. First make things right with your brother or sister and then come back and offer your gift. 25 Be sure to make friends quickly with your opponents while you are with them on the way to court. Otherwise, they will haul you before the judge, the judge will turn you over to the officer of the court, and you will be thrown into prison. 26 I say to you in all seriousness that you won't get out of there until you've paid the very last penny. 27 "You have heard that it was said, Don't commit adultery.[b] 28 But I say to you that every man who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery in his heart. 29 And if your right eye causes you to fall into sin, tear it out and throw it away. It's better that you lose a part of your body than that your whole body be thrown into hell. 30 And if your right hand causes you to fall into sin, chop it off and throw it away. It's better that you lose a part of your body than that your whole body go into hell. 31 "It was said, 'Whoever divorces his wife must give her a divorce certificate.'<sup>[c]</sup> 32 But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife except for sexual unfaithfulness forces her to commit adultery. And whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery. 33 "Again you have heard that it was said to those who lived long ago: Don't make a false solemn pledge, but you should follow through on what you have pledged to the Lord.<sup>[d]</sup> 34 But I say to you that you must not pledge at all. You must not pledge by heaven, because it's God's throne. 35 You must not pledge by the earth, because it's God's footstool. You must not pledge by Jerusalem, because it's the city of the great king. 36 And you must not pledge by your head, because you can't turn one hair white or black. 37 Let your yes mean yes, and your no mean no. Anything more than this comes from the evil one.

## Sermon

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be pleasing to you O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

Perhaps the best advice I've ever received from a therapist about life wasn't even directly advice, but instead, a question for me to ponder, a question that really made me think: *Do you want to be right or do you want to be happy?* Do you want to be right - to win the argument, to feel justified in your belief, to experience vindication - or do you want to be happy? Now, this is something of a false dichotomy. These things surely aren't opposites, and it's entirely possible to be both right and happy. But sometimes, and many of us know this feeling, we find ourselves in situations where we may in fact be right, but constantly asserting our correctness is roughly equal to screaming into the void. Of course the people in the wrong should admit that and come to see what's right, but if they won't, and we can't change that, the question

comes back to us: Do we want to be right, or do we want to be happy?

In today's scriptures, we hear two messages that bring this to my mind. The first comes from Deuteronomy, where we find one of my favorite passages of the Bible: **I have set life and death, blessing and curse before you. Now choose life so that you and your descendants will live.** There's not an obvious reason why I love that passage so much, other than it seems to so simply set for the options that exist for us as people of faith. The other isn't a quote, but the overwhelming reality of Jesus's apparent oneness in Matthew. You've heard it said don't murder? Well I say don't even be angry! You've been told not to commit adultery? Well I say don't even think twice about another person's attractiveness! Someone told you not to lie? Well I say don't make any promises at all! In the face of both messages, I think that's it's

helpful to ask ourselves: do we want to be right, or do we want to be happy? Or, in another way, will we choose life?

First, let me tell you what I'm not talking about. I'm not talking about suppressing justice or subjecting ourselves to the manipulative whims of those in power in our lives. It is always appropriate for right to stand up to wrong. For instance, a number of female colleagues have reported to me that their male superiors, whether denominational staff or supervisors at local churches, have plagiarized the work of their female counterparts, sometimes using their entire sermons without giving any credit to the intelligence or contributions of these female leaders of faith. No quotes, no citations, no thankfulness. That's the kind of thing that they're right to confront, that they're right to be upset about, and if they so choose, right to seek happiness by seeking justice in terms of public apology through admission and confession.

Where I'd like to apply this question is, instead, to our relationship with God. Do you want to be right or want to be happy? As God's children, as God's creatures, would we rather insist that we know what is best, or are we willing to find our happiness under God's direction and vision for life?

What we need to learn to do, each of us, is this: let God be God so you can be you. Let God be God so that you can be you. Part of that means we have to stop insisting that we're right all the time, particularly in relation to God. I can't tell you how many conversations I encounter that aren't discussions but just a long long game of assertions that each speaker thinks the other needs to hear. We tend to do the same thing with God, to tell God what we think is right rather than listen to God's good guidance. Here's a little secret about the human condition: we're not able to know everything ourselves. We weren't designed that way. We can learn from God. We can access God's wisdom, but we are dependent

creatures that way, for we need to discover rather than dictate what's good for our lives. If we let God be right, then we may learn what is right.

It also means we have to learn to trust our intuition that leads us to God's voice. We have to learn to listen to God's voice, to pick God's voice out of the fray of other voices demanding your attention. And that's harder even than it sounds! When God says peace and the world says war, it may seem like an easy distinction to make. But all the stuff that Jesus is modifying in Matthew's gospel actually comes from the commands that God gave to the Israelites in the Torah. How do we know what it is that God's truly speaking to us when Jesus, who is God, seems to be changing what God's said before?

What Jesus is combatting here isn't what God said in the law, but the abusive legalism with which others applied it.

Pharisees, sadducees, and priests of his day would use God's law

to suppress others and reassert their own social power. The Law was no longer employed to create positive relationships with a God and with people, but instead used as a tool of oppression. When we seek to hear God's voice, we must follow Jesus's lead here. We're called to fulfill the law's intent for healthy relationships that bring together communities rather than exacting legal prejudice that separates a supposedly holy us from a supposedly sinful them. If we let God be good, and learn to listen to that good voice, then we too may come to know what is good.

Choosing life means choosing a world where we'd not God. It means choosing God's kingdom, even if that means losing power or privilege ourselves. Actually, let's be real. It always means losing power and privilege. To choose life in God's kingdom is to choose a realm where we're never the gods of our lives, where we're yoked with God's work in the world rather than uninhibited agents free to do whatever we might want. Now, this isn't bad news, truly. It's just

not the lives that we're used to seeking in America. We've just got to remember that the ideals of our creator aren't always in line with our personal preferences or national narratives. Rather than listen to the voices of Americana that tell us absolute individualism and personal authority is the ideal, instead we hear God's clarion call into community where we're not in charge and where we're responsible for everyone else. We are our brothers keeper because we live in a community where spiritual siblings matter more than personal success.

That, it seems, is what Jesus is highlighting in the increased seriousness of his teachings. We're responsible for the success of others. We shouldn't expect others to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps if we're there to shoulder the burden alongside them. Community is so serious to God that even anger is a serious offense that needs confession. Integrity is so serious to God that even lustful looks are enemies, for they treat people as objects

rather than partners. Divorce is serious because it breaks apart communities. Even overpromising is serious because it creates false expectations and breeds disappointment. Choosing life means choosing God's community over personal preference, choosing the hard way toward thriving together instead of the easier, selfish ways of happiness.

Do you want to be right, or do you want to be happy, truly, divinely happy? If you want to be happy in the way God created us to be happy, you won't always be right, but you will find life, if you choose it. Amen.