

Epiphany 6

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

February 16, 2020 at St. Matthew, Port Washington, WI

Love the Lord Your God!

Did you see it in the newspaper a few weeks ago? It was in the obituary sections. Nathan Schmit, of Port Washington, died unexpectedly. His obituary explained how he was a great guy with many gifts and lots of friends. The obituary explained how Nathan often gathered with his friends. *“It was at one of those gatherings, surrounded by friends, that Nathan made the one choice he would forever regret. He chose to join in the experimentation with drugs. That single decision, made in the moment as a teenager, planted the seed of addiction, an illness that he would battle for the rest of his life. ... In the cold, early morning hours of January 11, 2020, at the age of 30, Nathan lost his battle.”* Nathan made a bad decision and it cost him his life.

Moses is making the same point to the Israelites here in Deuteronomy 30. At this point in their history, they were about to move into the promised land of Canaan. The Lord is urging them not to make a bad decision by turning away from him toward the false gods of the Canaanites. When he tells them to choose life, remember that these people are already believers. He is not telling them to decide to be a believer. We can't do that, just like no one can choose to be born into this world. Being born is something that happens to you. Likewise, being a believer is something that happens to us. Once we are alive, though, we do have the ability to end our life by not caring for our body or committing suicide. Likewise, we can not make ourselves believers, but we can commit spiritual suicide. We can destroy our faith. The Lord is urging his people not do that. Instead, love the Lord your God.

The Lord's encouragement follows the pattern of an ancient contract. He summarizes the choice before them (:15), **“See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction.”** If they follow him, things will go well. If they turn away from him, they will suffer. A typical contract has witnesses to verify what was said. In verse 19, Moses called upon the heaven and earth as witnesses.

These words of Moses remind me of a father giving the keys for a new car to his 18-year-old son. What a tremendous gift. Before dad hands him the keys, though, love compels him to warn his son. “If you take care of your car, drive carefully and take care of general maintenance on time,

you will have many, many years of happy driving. But if you treat it rough, drive rough, and don't change the oil, it will soon be worthless. Make good decisions, son.” The son is probably rolling his eyes, though. All he wants to do is to grab the keys and start driving his new car.

Do we roll our eyes when God talks to us. When he tells us, “Love the Lord, you God,” do we think, “Yea, yea. I know. Keep the commandments. Don't sin. Yada, yada. Would you leave me alone now?” These words were written down because we need this warning just like the Old Testament believers did. Every day, we face dangers as we take steps on our journey through life. Each day, we could blow it all. All it takes is:

- One grudge buried in our hearts which steers us away from loving others.
- One lie that we repeat again and again instead of confessing.
- Some lust that leads our heart away from our spouse or future spouse.
- One decision that we don't NEED to go to church every Sunday.
- One choice that puts something as more important than connecting our children with Jesus.

Every day, we face choices which can easily steer us away from Jesus. The actual choice each day might not seem to be faith destroying. We could argue, “I'm not going to lose my faith just because I said a bad word.” Or, “My children aren't going to go to hell just because they missed Sunday School.” But, you see, my friends, each step that does not bring us closer to Jesus, takes us further away from him. The Israelites did not think that they would ever turn away from God, either. But they did. Learn from them. Love the Lord your God.

The people at the time of Jesus thought that they loved the Lord. After all, they were good people who kept the commandments. Well...in a way they did. They did not stab someone in the heart so they thought that they kept the Fifth Commandment. But they had no problem harboring hatred in their hearts toward others, which was steering them away from God. They did not hop into bed with someone who wasn't their spouse and so they thought that they kept the Sixth Commandment. But they had no problem filing for divorce whenever they weren't happy with their spouse. That, also, was wrong and was steering them away from God. They were careful to do whatever they took an oath to do so they thought that they kept the Second Commandment. But Jesus had to point out to them that God's name is so important, they should not be making frivolous oaths. Throughout the Sermon on the Mount, which has been the Gospel lesson for the last few weeks, Jesus is pointing out to the people

that they have not kept the commandments as they should. They can not hope to get into heaven based on their own goodness.

Boy, do we need that reminder too. Our sinful nature is proud and likes to pat us on the back and tell us that we are pretty good people. We are in church and so we think that we have honored God's Word and kept the 3rd Commandment. Never mind that the words of the service often bounce off of us like rain hitting a windshield and have no effect on us. We have not murdered anybody (recently?) and so we think that we have protected life and kept the 5th Commandment. Never mind that we grumble and complain when we have to help somebody instead of being eager to serve others. We haven't robbed any banks (recently?) and so we think that we have protected possessions and kept the 7th Commandment. Never mind that we consider our money to be ours from which we give a little to the Lord, instead of properly seeing all our money as belonging to God and using some of his to live on.

Through his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus was leading the people, and us, to look inside our hearts. Even though our outward actions sometimes make us appear to be better than others, none of us are perfect. Our thoughts and attitudes are often selfish and greedy. None of us are perfect and it only takes one sin to make each one of us SIN-FULL – full of sin.

A few years ago, in winter, I was turning around in a parking lot. Some freshly fallen snow covered a patch of ice and I started slowly sliding. My front tire gently bumped the curb. I did not think anything about it. But when I got up to speed on the highway, I noticed that the car was pulling to the left. My tire was out of alignment and so the car would slowly steer itself to the left. To stay in my lane, I had to constantly be steering a bit to the right. Obviously, that was bad on the tires and I got it fixed as soon as I could.

If you think that your life of faith is just fine now and that you are doing pretty well as a believer and that there is nothing that you need to change in your life, then, my friends, the Devil already has you hooked. Every one of our hearts is out of alignment with the straight path of God's Word and will as summarized in the 10 Commandments. We all have a sinful nature which is constantly trying to steer us away from Jesus and into the ditch of eternal death. We need this warning that God gave his people in Deuteronomy 30. We need the warning that, by nature, we are inclined toward sin. We need to hear that our faith is in danger. The devil

has you in his sights and he already has a plan for how he can get you to go in the wrong direction. One wrong decision can have eternally deadly consequences.

When you hear the Lord speak these words in Deuteronomy, do not think of him as an angry drill instructor yelling at you, "You had better love the Lord your God or else!" Yes, it's true that if you turn away from the Lord, it will be "or else" for all of eternity. But the Lord does not try to scare us straight. No! He is like a bridegroom on Valentine's Day speaking to his fiancé, "Come with me. Come, let me protect you and provide for you. Come, let me care for you. Come, live with me and be my love, And we will all the pleasures prove."

Moses explained to the Israelites (:20), "**The LORD is your life.**" Without the Lord you would not be alive physically or spiritually. Without the Lord, you are dead. The Lord is the source of life for you. You need him. The Lord is the one who carefully controlled world history for thousands of years until Jesus was born at just the right time and place. He did it all for you! The Lord is the one who lived an entire life on this earth, constantly and carefully keeping every commandment, just so he could give you credit for it all. He did it all for you! The Lord is the one who stood still while they hit him and spit on him and called him evil things and falsely accused and unfairly condemned him. He did it all for you! The Lord is the one who adopted you as his dear child and held you close to his heart when you were baptized. He did it all for you! Your God is the Lord, the Lord of love, compassion and mercy. He was willing to die for you and proved it as he hung on the cross, all the time thinking, "For you, my love." He is the Lamb of God who takes away your sin. He is the compassionate Father who is close to the brokenhearted. He provides all of your daily bread. He works all things in your life for your eternal good even though you complain because you can't see it at times. He gives you the keys to the kingdom of heaven. He is the Groom who pursues and woos and proposes to live with you in spiritual sickness and health. He is your life!

We want to stay close to him. We want to steer away from sin and every evil every day. We want to honor him who honored us. We want to use the commandments as directions for how to live our lives. We want our children and generations after them to be with us in heaven. We want to show the world how much the Lord God means to us. We want to love the Lord our God, here and eternally. Amen.