

***Choose Life***  
**Matthew 5:21-26**

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Choose life! Way back in the Old Testament Moses called the people of Israel to choose life. With those words Moses exhorted the people of Israel to make a decision. Following God would be a choice for life. On the other hand, following the patterns of those who worship false gods, turning away from the commands of God, rejecting a relationship of faith and trust with the one true God, well, that would be choosing death. Moses lays it all out for the people of God and says, “Choose life.” The promise is that if you choose life, if you choose life as it is described by God and as it is offered by God, you will experience blessing.

Choose life is not something that only applies to the people who followed Moses out of Egypt and into the Promised Land. Choose life is something that has been of greatest importance to every person, to every generation, to every tribe, and to every nation. Choose life is a choice that confronts each of us every day of our lives.

To help us understand what it means to choose life, God gave a commandment that speaks directly to the matter of choosing life. This commandment is so important God included it in his list of the top ten commandments. Since the Ten Commandments were given to Moses on Mount Sinai, and since the Ten Commandments were written on stone tablets, this commandment about choosing life is literally written in stone. There is no negotiating with the command. Here is the commandment God gave about choosing life. “Thou shalt not murder.”

If I asked you to make a choice today, do you think you could make the choice that would be for life? This is a major question and our answer, our choice, is of the utmost importance. This is such an important question it is only natural for the choice set before us to fill this room with tension, with drama, with intensity, and high anxiety. Everything is riding on this choice. If you think there was tension when Regis Philburn asked if you wanted to be a millionaire, and everything depended on your final

answer...if Vanna White spun the wheel and flipped all the vowels and consonants you selected and Pat Sajak asked you to solve the puzzle on Wheel of Fortune and you thought that was pressure...if it was Final Jeopardy and you had bet all your winnings and that famous tune ominously played until you had to give your answer...da da da da da da...da da da da dunt da dunta dunta...well, take all that pressure and anxiety and drama and tension and multiply it by a factor of a thousand...or more, and then you would be ready for the choice before you today. Choose life. Here are your two options. Murder...or Do Not Murder. Cue the Jeopardy theme song as you think long and hard about your choice. And remember...choose life. Did you make a choice? Did you make the right choice? Did you choose life? My guess is you did. It really is almost an absurdly simple choice. Murder... or Do Not Murder. Of course, the answer is, "Do Not Murder." If you chose, "Do Not Murder" the bells are ringing, you will soon be on your way to Disneyland, confetti is falling all around you, and fireworks are exploding in a blaze of glory. Congratulations! You chose life!

To choose life is very interesting. It really is as simple as the choice between "Murder" and "Do Not Murder." And yet when we take a closer look at what it means to choose life, that choice for life extends far beyond avoiding the taking of life through murder. The complexity of choosing life is on full display in what the bible presents as the first murder. In the 4<sup>th</sup> chapter of Genesis, which is the very first book in the bible, one of the sons born to Adam and Eve, the son named Cain, makes a choice between "Murder" and "Do Not Murder." Unfortunately, when the time comes for Cain to make his decision, he is filled with anger. His feelings have been hurt. Cain feels like God has shown favoritism to his brother Abel and Cain is jealous. Between his hurt feelings, his jealousy, and the anger that is burning within him, Cain is not in a good place to make the right choice. In fact, Cain is primed to make exactly the wrong choice. Masking his true intention Cain invites his brother Abel out to the field, and when they are alone in the field, Cain makes his tragic choice. Cain attacks his brother Abel and puts him to death. Cain murders his brother. Cain chooses murder.

On the surface, we might not understand how this story has much complexity, if any at all. Cain's choice is straightforward. Cain chooses murder. The evidence is clear. Case closed. Cain did not choose life. But the story of Cain's murder of his brother Abel poses a question that raises the complexity beyond a simple and straightforward act of murder. When God approaches Cain after he has murdered his brother Abel, the Lord asks, "Where is your brother Abel?" In reply, Cain asks the Lord a question. The question Cain asks has echoed down through the centuries. The question Cain asks is a profound question. The question Cain asks complicates this already troubling story of the first murder in the bible, the murder of one brother by another. The question Cain asks is this: "Am I my brother's keeper?"

Cain has just murdered his brother. What kind of a question is that, "Am I my brother's keeper?" It is so clear that Cain has made the wrong choice in murdering his brother, we naturally want to intervene and answer his question. "Am I my brother's keeper?" Absolutely! Of course! Without a doubt! Cain, you are your brother's keeper, and you failed. You made the wrong decision. You did not choose life.

But this is what makes the story of Cain and Abel so powerful, and so important. What if Cain had made the right choice, and did not murder his brother? What if Cain chose life? What if Abel lived? Would the question, "Am I my brother's keeper?" no longer be valid? If Cain chose not to murder his brother Abel, would that fulfill his responsibility of being his brother's keeper?

With that thought, and that questions rattling around in our minds, let us turn to the Sermon on the Mount, where Jesus takes up the commandment that says, "You shall not murder." Hear the words of our Lord Jesus Christ. "You have heard it said to the people long ago, 'You shall not murder....' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with brother or sister will be subject to judgment. Again, anyone who says... 'You fool!' will be in danger of the fire of hell." If Cain had chose differently, if Cain had acted differently, if Cain had not murdered his brother, his responsibility would not be done. His responsibility would not be completed. He would still be responsible as his brother's keeper. According to the words of Jesus, if Cain had not acted on his anger and

murdered his brother, he would still need to figure out how to deal with his anger. “If you are angry with your brother or sister you will be subject to judgment.” Murder is no good. Murder is wrong. And yet just saying no to murder is not the end of the story. The anger we might feel towards our brother, our sister, our neighbor, even our enemy... is anger that needs to be dealt with. Why? Because to choose life means we not only avoid murder, we also take seriously our responsibility to be the keeper of our brothers and sisters with whom we share this precious gift of life.

When Jesus expands on the commandment, “Thou shalt not murder”, he is calling us to embrace life in every aspect, in every relationship. So hopefully we do not murder another person, even an adversary. Good! Better than good, that is great! Please, do not murder. But once we refrain from murdering our adversary, listen to what Jesus tells us to do. “Settle matters quickly with your adversary who is taking you to court. Do it while you are still together on the way to court...” Jesus is telling us once we resist the urge to murder our adversary, then we need to take the next step and try to resolve the issues that cause us to be adversaries. Resolve! Reconcile! Forgive! Ask to be forgiven! Work things out! Repair the relationship! We might even say that when you have obeyed the commandment of not murdering, you still have the commandment to love your neighbor.

Choose life. That really is complex, isn't it? I realize that I want to be sure you hear two things from me at this point. One is that Jesus really does want us to choose life in all its fullness, in all its richness, and yes, in all its complexities. Jesus raises the bar on what it means to choose life. It is so much more than following the basic commandment, “Thou shalt not murder.” And yet part of the complexity is that the commandment about love says, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” To choose life, to truly choose life, there is an important and vital understanding that we have to love ourselves. And that means we have to care for ourselves. We have to learn to set boundaries so that we protect ourselves. There are relationships that are toxic. There are relationships that are harmful. There are relationships that demean and destroy who we are, relationships that demean and destroy the very core of who we are. Love your neighbor as you love yourself gives you permission to love yourself, to protect yourself, and to care for yourself.

Recognizing that loving our neighbor and being the keeper of our brother and sister is filled with complexity, when we choose life it also holds out the possibility of amazing blessings. When we choose life we might well experience reconciliation in our relationships. It took some twenty years but another pair of feuding brothers, Jacob and Esau, had a reconciliation. Twenty years! Sometimes to reconcile requires time and space for hurt feelings to lessen, for forgiveness to be offered and accepted, for anger to wear itself out. Joseph and his brothers took something like twenty years for them to have a tearful reunion and reconciliation. Sometimes God gives the gift like he gave Joseph of being able to see that things that were intended to bring harm have been used by God to bring good.

I will always treasure a few lines from a book where a well-respected man has died. His life touched many. He was kind and gracious. They had a viewing for the man when he died. People were walking by his casket and paying their last respects. Two bitter enemies arrived at the casket at the exact same time. They looked at each other. They looked at the man in the casket. And they shook hands. They shook hands. They said, "He would have wanted this from us." I don't really know how reconciliation and forgiveness happen. It is complex. But if two bitter enemies could look at their friend and say, "He would have wanted this," I have to believe that people like you and like me who have been loved by Jesus with his everlasting love might find ourselves seeking to reconcile and restore relationships just from this simple knowledge, "Jesus would have wanted this."

Or when we walk down the road of life and see someone in need, even a stranger. Jesus does not let us stick out our chest with pride and say, "I did my duty. I did not murder that stranger who was in need. I chose life." Not on your life should we ever boast just because we did not murder someone. Jesus tells the most powerful of stories about someone who stopped to help the stranger who was in need. The story is so powerful because some religious folks walked right on by. They did not stop to help. When we hear the command to love our neighbor as ourselves, we have only to turn to that parable of the Good Samaritan to understand how Jesus is calling us to stop and help the one in need. That is what it means to choose life.

When Jesus told another parable about sheep and goats, he did not say, “I was hungry and thirsty, I needed clothes, I was a stranger, I was sick or in prison, and you did not murder me.” No, that is not what Jesus said. Of course, we are not supposed to murder the least of these. But the power of the parable is found in understanding that we are the keeper of our brothers and sisters, we are called to love our neighbor, we are called to reach out with concern and compassion for those in need. When we choose life like that, we hear Jesus saying, “When you did it to the least of these, you did it unto me.” When Jesus said, “You have heard it said, ‘You shall not murder’, but I say unto you...”, I don’t think we miss the mark if we hear Jesus saying, “but I say unto you choose life.” You are the keeper of your brother and your sister and your friend and your neighbor and your enemy and the ones who are the least, the hungry and thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the prisoner and the one who is sick. Do not murder! Choose life. Do choose life. In all of its many complexities, choose life.

Choosing life is always a choice, and it is not an easy choice. When you choose life you pretty much put yourself out there and open yourself to both risk and reward. I am so glad Julie is a risk taker. God gave me a partner in life and a partner in ministry who is a risk taker. Because of that, we have been blessed with many rich and wonderful rewards.

In the spring of 2001, before the attacks of 9/11, Julie was working in a ministry that was helping to resettle refugees. One of the groups being resettled were ones who became known as the Lost Boys of Sudan. These young men had to flee their homes to escape war in their country, and what they endured is hard to imagine. It was terrible. These boys knew murder, and they knew murder first-hand. Some escaped, and through refugee resettlement programs a group arrived in Houston in the spring of 2001. Julie was so involved in the lives of these young men, helping them learn basics like cooking, refrigeration of food items, finding jobs, and making a home in a land that was thousands of miles from their home and light years from anything they had ever experienced. One of the Lost Boys was named Samuel, and Samuel became a special friend.

The first time I met Samuel was one of most comical experiences I have ever had in my life. Samuel came walking down the halls of our church. All of the Lost Boys were tall and slender, skinny as a rail. Samuel came walking down the halls of our church and when he saw me, he called out in a loud voice, “Bubba!” He came up to me, called me Bubba, and gave me a warm hug that was so wonderful. What amazed me most of all is that in California, long before we ever moved to Texas, my nickname had been Bubba. I love that nickname. That is what we are trying to get our granddaughter Clara to call me. We keep telling her I am Bubba. Well, can you imagine my surprise when Samuel Biar, just arrived from Sudan, Africa, saw me and knew I was Bubba. That’s not too shabby. I had worldwide fame as Bubba. Then Samuel told me, “Bubba”...or Boppa..or something of the sort means father in Sudan. As Samuel wrapped me in his warm embrace he said, “You will be our father.” What had at first been a moment of high comedy became a moment of incredible responsibility. “You will be our father.” Here was a young man in his early twenties from the other side of the world, fleeing persecution and violence, holding me in his arms telling me, “You will be our father.” Sometimes God puts us in situations that we never expected or anticipated and says, “Choose life.”

I fell short in being a father to Samuel and the other Lost Boys. Looking back there is so much more I could have done to be a father to Samuel, but even so we built a friendship that endures to this day. And the beautiful thing about choosing life, choosing to go beyond not murdering someone to actually building a relationship, the amazing and beautiful thing is that as one door opens it leads to yet another opportunity to choose life. In March of 2007, six years after Samuel came to the United States, he told me he had reconnected with his mother in Sudan. Miraculously, she had survived the terrible violence that ripped their country and their family apart. But when Samuel reconnected with his mother, he learned she was gravely ill. Samuel made the brave decision to travel back to Sudan to find his mother and see if he could help nurse her back to health.

I said when you choose life it often leads to another door that opens and another door and...? Well, right around this time, right before Samuel told me about his mother, I was preparing to travel back to California to see my mother. After I had made my plans, I learned that my sister Anne's mother-in-law had died. Since I was coming to California to see my mom, Anne told me her husband Richard was hoping I could conduct the funeral for his mother. Richard is a great brother-in-law. He is a stand-up guy. When my dad was sick and confined to a wheelchair, Richard came to my parent's house and reconstructed their bathroom, making it handicap-accessible. Could I help with the funeral for Richard's mother? That was a no-brainer. I was honored.

I did the funeral for Richard's mother. Richard's brother was at the funeral. After the service Richard's brother, whose name is Steve, came up and gave me a one hundred-dollar bill. He said, "Use it in your ministry." I tucked the hundred-dollar bill in my pocket. Soon on my way back to Houston.

I had only been back in Houston a few days when Samuel Biar came by my office. It was at that point he told me that he was leaving for a while, and that I should not worry if I could not get a hold of him for a period of time. It was then that Samuel told he had received a phone call from Sudan that his mother was ill. He had just bought a ticket to fly to Nairobi, Kenya. From there Samuel would walk through regions filled with landmines until he made it home to see his mother. He said, "What else can I do? She has brought me into this world, and now I must care for her. Our God tells us to honor our mothers, and so I must go." Samuel told me all this at our church. That particular day some other folks were at church for various meetings. When Samuel told me he was going back to Sudan, I gathered several people who were in the halls of the church and we laid hands on Samuel and prayed for him. As we finished the prayer and Samuel prepared to leave, I thought I should give Samuel some money to help with his trip. I reached in my pocket, and I felt a \$100 bill. It was the one from Steve, the one Richard's brother gave me in California. It was the \$100 bill Steve gave me to use in honor of his mother. I could think of no better way than for Samuel to use that \$100 as he searched for his mother.

Jesus said, “You have heard it said, ‘You shall not murder.’” Of course not. But when we have made that first and basic choice not to murder, that is when the real living begins. That is when questions of great importance confront us. “Am I my brother and my sister’s keeper?” “Who is my neighbor?” And with those questions we find ourselves presented with an amazing and wonderful opportunity to make a choice. We can choose life. We can choose life in all its complexities, all its chaos, all its confusion...and we can choose life in all of its wonders and joy and blessings and beauty. Choose life. It is the right choice, and it is the best choice.