

Choices

Mark 9:38-50

It was one of the most gripping news stories of 2003. In the beautiful but desolate mountains of southeastern Utah 27 year-old mountain climber Aron Ralston made a desperate decision. An avid outdoors man, Aron was rock climbing one day when his right arm became trapped under an 800-pound boulder.

He knew that he was in trouble, took out his pocketknife and chipped away at the rock for 10 hours, managing to produce only a small handful of dust. Days were passing and he hadn't told folks where he planned to hike, his family and friends weren't even looking for him. They were used to him hiking for days. With his arm still wedged beneath this enormous boulder Aron Ralston recorded a video message to his parents telling them good-bye.

At the end of several days with no food or water, however, Aron chose to cut off his arm in order to save his life. Using his pocket knife and without medication, showing an amazing display of courage and determination, he did just that. And when he was finished, he applied a tourniquet to his arm and rappelled nearly 70 feet to the floor of the canyon.

Then he hiked five miles downstream where he encountered other hikers and was rescued. Aron Ralston made the obviously excruciating decision to amputate his right arm to save his life.¹ It's an amazing story!

Sometimes in life we have to choose. That's what Jesus is saying this morning. There are times when we are called to make choices in life, and those choices determine our destiny.

Years ago an old country preacher with a teenage son decided to test his son's ability to make choices. He went into the boy's room and placed on the boy's desk three objects: a Bible, a silver dollar, and a bottle of whiskey. "Now then," the old preacher said to himself, "I'll just hide behind the door here, and when my son comes home from school this afternoon, I'll see which of these three objects he picks up.

If he picks up the Bible, he's going to be a preacher like me. If he picks up the dollar, he's going to be a businessman, and that would be okay, too. But if he picks up the bottle of whiskey, he's going to be a no-good drunkard."

Soon the old man heard his son's footsteps as he came in the house. He watched as the boy walked over to inspect the three items on the desk. First, the boy picked up the Bible and placed it under his arm. Then he picked up the silver dollar and dropped it into his pocket. Finally, he uncorked the bottle and took a big drink. "Lord have mercy," the old man whispered, "He's gonna be a politician!"²

¹ Dave Burchett, *Bring 'Em Back Alive—A Healing Plan for Those Wounded by the Church* (WaterBrook Press, Colorado Springs, CO, 2004).

² Monday Fodder (Sermon_Fodder-subscribe@yahoo.com)

Life is a matter of choices. Choices about how you spend your time. Choices about how you spend your money. Choices about what you believe to be important.

In Death Valley, there is a place known as Dante's View. From this location you can look down into the lowest spot in the United States, a depression in the earth two hundred feet below sea level called Black Water. But from Dante's View you can also look up to the highest peak in the United States, Mt. Whitney, rising to a height of 14,500 feet. In one direction you move to the lowest spot in the United States, in the other, to the highest. From Dante's View, only the traveler can decide which direction he or she will take.³

There are choices we must make. Just as Aron Ralston made the excruciating decision to amputate his arm, there are choices each of us must make about how we live our lives as Christians.

If you're going to have a healthy body, there are choices you must make about what you eat and what you drink. If you're going to have a healthy spiritual life, there are choices you must make about the things you give your mind. If you're going to have a healthy marriage and a healthy family, there are choices you're going to have to make about career and family time.

Every day of our lives we're confronted with choices. Most of these are relatively easy choices and require little of our time and energy. When you got ready this morning, you probably didn't agonize about what to wear. I hope you didn't agonize too much over whether to come to this service. But our lives consist of the choices we make.

The most important choice, of course, is the choice to follow Jesus. It really doesn't matter in the long run of things where you choose to live, what kind of car you drive, what kind of music you listen to. The only thing that really matters is whether you consciously seek to be all that God intends for you to be.

I realize that I may need to convince some of you of that. Many of us are what might be called "of course" Christians. That is, if I were to ask you, are you a Christian, you might say, "Of course." "My parents are Christians. I've gone to church all my life. I am not Jewish or Buddhist or even agnostic. Of course, I am a Christian." Unfortunately the world is filled with "of course" Christians. That's different from the kind of Christian who follows Jesus.

It's the difference of living an effective life or an ineffective life. Some of you know people who live lives that have no real impact on the world around them. They're here on this earth, but that's about all you can say about them. They're nice people. They don't do any real harm, it's just that the world won't be much different by their passing.

And no one will miss them that much. They haven't lived bad lives, just ineffective ones. Our faith in Christ should give unity and purpose to our lives and help us to be more effective in every area of our lives.

Our commitment to Christ affects how effectively we operate, for example, as parents. When we define ourselves as a "Christian" parents, that says something about how we

³ Maxie Dunnam, *The Devil at Noon Day* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1996.)

view our role as fathers and mothers. Our children become a priority in our lives. We make time for them, we seek to guide them in ways of righteousness and love. We stand by them when they are in trouble, and we never give up on them. Because we have made a commitment to be the best parents we can be.

The chaplain of a state prison received a request from a father of a young man who was interned at the prison. The young man had committed a robbery and had been sentenced for many years in jail. He was angry, embittered. The boy's father came each week to visit him, but the boy steadfastly refused to see him. The chaplain was asked to intervene, to plead with the boy to see his father, but the young prisoner refused.

Despite his refusal, the boy's father took off work every week, boarded a bus, and traveled across the state in the hope of seeing his son. Every week. It became the young minister's difficult task each week to ask the son, "Do you want to see your dad?" Then he had to bear word of the refusal to the waiting father. The father would thank the chaplain, gather his belongings, and head toward the door for the bus trip back home.

One day after telling the father that once again his son would not meet with him, the chaplain said, "No one would do what you are doing. Your son is an embittered, defiant young man. Give up. Go back home and get on with your life. No one would put up with this kind of rejection, week after week. Nobody would do this."

The older man looked the younger one straight in the eye. Then he said, "God has put up with it for centuries." He picked up his meager belongings and walked toward the door.⁴

"If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off." It's not one of Jesus' more popular teachings. But it says to us in a stark way that a choice must be made. We cannot forever straddle the fence. Are you on Christ's side or not? Christ promises us a more effective life and the gift of eternal life. All we have to do in return is say, "Yes."

⁴ www.westminsterpasadena.org/sermons/april_01_01.htm.