

“Solid Choices”

Matthew 5:13–16; Matthew 5:27–30

Matthew 6:25–34

Solid souls strive to make solid choices.

Choices. We could say that we are defined by the choices we make. Some are large and obviously important. Most are small and seemingly insignificant. But it is in the thousands of small choices we make that our character, our identity, is found. Do we strive to make choices that are Christlike or do we go our own way, doing whatever we think is right, day after day, year after year?



God created us as solid souls, solid selves, made in the image of God and given the responsibility to care for God’s creation. But a life filled with poor choices—those that pay God no mind—is a life that dissipates and disperses our soul. The ground we stand on becomes ever weaker and more fragile, moving underneath us as we chase one desire after another with little heed for how we were created to live. It is as if we trade in heaven for hell. We find we’ve surrendered the Kingdom of God for goldplated baubles that tarnish and crumble and then are surprised that our souls have shriveled up.

Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) is an excellent starting place to reimagine who we really are and what it means to live in the Kingdom of God/heaven now. As he often did, Jesus used the most ordinary of materials metaphorically, helping us to see the truth. For example, salt and light.

Salt?

Salt has many uses. Some positive, some negative. A swim in the ocean is always good for healing small nicks and scrapes. All animals need a certain amount of salt in their diet to live. Who doesn’t crave salty snacks! Of course, salt also kills. The Dead Sea is sometimes referred to as the Salt Sea. Photographs of its shore reveal rocks and gravel covered with layers of dried, white salts. Nothing can live there. The salts have squeezed all life out of the environment.

Drawing on these contrasting properties, the biblical writers generously used images of salt. Sometimes it was used as an image of seasoning, preserving, or purifying. But salt is also used as an image of death, desolation, or even a curse. God’s covenant with his people is occasionally referred to as a covenant of salt, drawing upon the preserving qualities (Leviticus 2:13; Numbers 18:19; 2 Chronicles 13:5). Newborn babies were rubbed with salt as a symbol of new beginnings. Paul urged the Christians to speak with “grace, seasoned with salt” (Colossians 4:6). Yet, more than a millennia before Paul, Abimelech spread salt across the ground of a razed city as a sign of a curse (Judges 9:45).

In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus begins the Sermon on the Mount with the Beatitudes, a very moving reversal of the world’s value systems. Then he immediately speaks to the disciples about their own vocation, their own call to actually be God’s people, a community grounded firmly in the kingdom of God. Jesus uses three metaphors to make his point. The first is salt; the second is light; the third is the city.

Contrasts and choices

Jesus calls upon the contrasting uses of salt. On the one hand, salt gives life, but on the other, it can be rendered useless. Which sort of disciple will John, Andrew, Peter and the rest be? Will they be good for something, or, like the tasteless salt, will they be good for nothing? The choice is stark and clear. It is one way or the other. Up or down. No shades of gray or ambiguity. This is certainly in keeping with the demands for submission and loyalty to Jesus that he makes.

To make the same point again, Jesus uses the image of light. Will his disciples hide their light or will they raise it up and let it shine so that the whole world can be seen in the light? Which will it be? And why are they to be a shining light? So that all people in all places can see, through the good works of the disciples, that God is God and that Jesus is Lord of all creation.

Likewise, a city that sits on a hill is going to be seen by everyone, whether the city wants to be seen or not. The world will be looking at the disciples whether they want to be seen or not. Our life is a witness to God whether we want it to be or not.

“THE SALT AND LIGHT SAYINGS PICTURE MISSION AS INHERENT TO DISCIPLESHIP, AS SALTINESS IS ESSENTIAL TO SALT AND SHINING IS ESSENTIAL TO LIGHT. FOR SALT, BEING SALTY IS NOT OPTIONAL. WITH THESE THREE METAPHORS OF SALT, LIGHT, AND CITY, THE MATTHEAN JESUS STRIKES A DEATH BLOW TO ALL RELIGION THAT IS PURELY PERSONAL AND PRIVATE. . . THE COMMUNITY THAT LIVES BY THE POWER OF UNOSTENTATIOUS PRAYER IN THE INNER ROOM (MATTHEW 6:6) IS NOT AN INTROVERTED SECRET SOCIETY SHIELDING ITSELF FROM THE WORLD, BUT IS A CITY SET ON A HILL WHOSE AUTHENTIC LIFE CANNOT BE CONCEALED.”¹

In these three brief metaphors Jesus appeals to our imaginations, helping us to grasp the radical, outwardly focused nature of the Christian life. *Our lives, the choices we make, are to be like pictures of God’s love that can be seen by all those who have not yet placed their trust in the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Adultery and betrayal

Yep . . . a choice we make. Will we remain truly faithful to our spouses or not? We who are married said we would in the vows we took, but those vows are embodied in the countless choices we

make every day. Adultery and betrayal lie at the end of a journey, not at the beginning.

The over-arching Old Testament story is that of covenant betrayal, judgment, and restoration. Nearly every OT prophet comes bearing a word from God about the coming destruction of unfaithful Israel, but also brings a word of hope and restoration. The people will have to bear the consequences of their betrayal but God will one day restore them as his people, putting things right for them and for all of creation. It is this restoration (a.k.a. the coming of the kingdom of God) that the Jews are so anxiously awaiting in Jesus’ day. It is the proclamation of God’s kingdom, this restoration that occupied much of Jesus’ ministry and was accomplished in his death.

We can see that this is somewhat like a marriage between a man and woman that has been rocked by unfaithfulness. It is hard and hurtful, marked by anger and despair. Yet, the couple makes it through, emerging on the other side with a marriage stronger than before. Is this really possible? With God, all things are possible!

Love is a choice. A choice. It is about what we do. True love is self-giving rather than self-seeking. Through God’s gift of sexual intimacy, spouses bond as “one flesh,” a bond so profound that it is a sign to their union with Christ, a bond so intimate that it is to be shared with no other person. God values marriage so highly that God is willing to use marriage as a metaphor for God’s relationship with us. Therefore, when we chase after false idols we are committing adultery.

The biblical perspective on love, marriage, and sex is that these gifts are all far more valuable than many of us want to acknowledge. These gifts from God are to be guarded and cherished, hence the teachings on sexual fidelity. As husbands and wives, our sexual energies – body, mind, and spirit – are to be poured into our marriage, toward our spouse.¹ Jesus taught that adultery is more than the physical act (Matthew 5:27); when our sexual energies are directed outside the marriage, our marriage is diminished and our souls are dissipated.

¹ This is why pornography poses such danger to marriages – it diverts our sexual energies outside our marriage and away from our spouse.

Further, if we habitually turn our spouse into an object for the gratification of our own desire, we have embraced the vice of lust. God calls us to lives of faithfulness in all things, including utter faithfulness to our beloved.

All these things will be given to you

I've always concentrated on the "do not worry" theme in today's passage from Matthew. Don't worry, don't worry. Yeah sure, I've thought to myself.

Perhaps that explains why I paid so little attention to the last verse: "But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." I paid little attention, despite this verse being the climax of the whole section! In the preceding verses, Jesus points us toward this great truth: the kingdom of God is to be the first priority in our lives and, if so, all else will follow. Our energies and passions and devotions are to be poured into the kingdom. In the Greek, "strive" is an imperative, a must do – we are to keep striving. This is not about a hoped-for-someday coming of God's kingdom but about its reality today, for our own lives. D.A. Hagner puts it this way in his commentary on Matthew: "This imperative means that one should make the kingdom the center of one's existence and thus experience the rule of God fully in one's heart." Even this is a bit abstract for me. How do we experience God's rule in our hearts?

The Kingdom of God is exactly what the words say: it is the place where God is king, where God rules. Thus, experiencing the rule of God in our hearts is a bit like this. I am a citizen of the United States. I try as best as I can to live according to the laws of the U.S. If I move to another country, even a lawless country, I can still choose to hold to the laws of the U.S. in my heart, to be governed by them even though I am no longer in the U.S. Thus, even though we live in a world that is plagued by tragedy, violence, illness, materialism, and selfishness we can choose to live according to God's law. In other words, we are to keep striving to live according to God's moral will, for that is true righteousness. The Sermon on the Mount is an extended block of Jesus' teachings about the nature of God's will for our lives, about what it means to be righteous, to do right in God's sight -- to make those solid choices that constitute living in Jesus' way.

Needs and wants

Jesus says if we strive first for God's kingdom, then "all these things will be given to you as well." What sorts of things? What we eat. What we drink. What we wear. (v. 31). Though I doubt that Jesus had in mind a diet of bread and water and trousers made of sackcloth, I also suspect he wasn't speaking of dinner at a four-star restaurant, Moët Chandon, and designer clothes.

We have a way of making "wants" into seeming "needs." To an extent, this is a good thing. Increasing standards of living have resulted in numerous benefits for millions of people. But, still, we seem to chase an unreachable goal. No matter how far along we get, we just redefine the target further away. Somebody always has a bigger house or a more luxurious car. George Will wrote, a need "is defined in contemporary America as a 48-hour-old want," leading to "a blurring of needs and wants." The result is what he calls the "tyranny of the unnecessary."²

No, we have to begin by recognizing that our own desires are misplaced. Too often, we seek the things of this world, whether it be stuff or status, rather than the things of God. Our journey must begin with the transformation of our minds and hearts, our desires and dreams. By the grace of God, such transformation can be ours, for, yes, solid souls can make solid choices.

² Quoted in Gregg Easterbrook's book, *The Progress Paradox*, p 136.