You Can't Have It All
Matthew 7:13-14
07 26 2009 Sam Jones Memorial United Methodist Church
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Introduction

I have found that the **first words** of a sermon can be the hardest to write. If the introduction is right, then the rest naturally follows. When the beginning is wrong, the words flow like molasses in January. So I spend an inordinate amount of time on the first word, the first sentence, and the first paragraph. Oftentimes, I find myself staring at the blinking cursor on the computer—and then I remember WHY it's called a "cursor!"

An English teacher taught our class several techniques for overcoming **writer's block**. One trick is to tell yourself, *"I am about to write the worst paper in the history of the world."* In theory, this technique frees up an author to put SOMETHING on paper and get the words flowing. This method really works. I have said this sentence to myself—and sure enough—I wrote the worst sermon in the history of the world!

First words are difficult because an author must **CHOOSE**. Out of an infinite number of ways to begin, a writer must pick ONE introduction. There can only be ONE first word, sentence, and paragraph. Faced with endless possibilities, a person can become overwhelmed with too many options.

I. The Nature of Life

This is a parable for life. We must constantly pick, choose, select, and decide. Every day is an ongoing **multiple choice test**. It begins each morning when we awake. Choose: hit the snooze button or get up; caffeinated or decaf coffee; Cheerios or chocolate covered donuts; bath or shower; shave or don't shave; news or music; long sleeves or short; jacket or umbrella; and the list goes on and on. We have made dozens of decisions before we even leave the house.

It can be **overwhelming** if you think about it. I was recently talking with someone who said, "Have you ever thought about how the smallest choices in life can make such a big difference? If you decide to lie in bed for 30 seconds longer or have a second cup of coffee or take one road rather than another, then it can affect your entire day. And like a rock thrown into the water, the ripples affect other people's lives you meet. One seemingly insignificant choice could change the entire world!"

Wow! I advised this person to immediately seek professional counseling! If you pursue this line of thought too long, life's choices could lead to "*analysis paralysis*" where you're afraid to decide anything. Then again, NOT deciding is also a decision! Harvey Cox once said: "Not to decide IS to decide."

II. You Can Have It All

Little wonder that our culture is so successful in preaching a false-gospel that eliminates choices and proudly proclaims, **"You CAN have it ALL!"** With missionary zeal, hucksters and shills peddle a religion without restraint. They declare that life is NOT

a series of "either/or" choices." Instead, we can make "both/and" decisions. In this fantasy world, you CAN have your cake and eat it, too. Like the old Nacho Cheese Dorito commercials, eat all the chips you want because we'll make more.

Our culture actively promotes the infantile fantasy that choices are not necessary in life. Life in a "both/and" world is an enticing proposition. It eliminates any need to pick one thing over another. For example:

- Buy whatever you want whenever you want it. Don't worry about income, budget, or payment. Just charge it and make easy, minimum payments each month. Eliminate any distinction between necessities and luxuries, needs and wants, affordability and exorbitance.

- There is no need to choose between marital vows and sexual infidelity. Marry the person of your dreams and then engage in extramarital affairs on the side. Say "*I do*" to one person and "*I will*" to another.

- Forget prioritizing your time. You can work 80 plus hours a week, watch TV until bedtime, play tennis or golf two times on the weekend, and STILL have plenty of time for your spouse and children.

- Parenthood need not change your previous, carefree lifestyle at all. Modern moms and dads can preserve all the "*Me Time*" they want while their children are raised by teachers, coaches, daycare, TV, video games, and computers.

- Eat all you like and don't worry about diets or exercise. There are machines, pills, and procedures that will do all of the work for you.

- Your family can attend church when it is convenient—once in a while or twice a year at Christmas and Easter—and still have healthy, spiritual lives. The church will even baptize your baby without really expecting parents to fulfill their vows to raise the child in the faith.

- You can promise to support Christ's church with your *"prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness"* without REALLY praying, attending, giving, serving, or witnessing. And the church will still be here to *"hatch, match, and dispatch"* your loved ones whenever it is convenient for you.

III. An Either/Or World

It's easy to see why a "both/and" world that does not demand "either/or" choices is an appealing fantasy. However, reality teaches us quite a different lesson. To live IS to choose. In his familiar poem entitled *"The Road Not Taken,"* **Robert Frost** wrote:

"Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler . . . ."

Yet such decisions are a daily part of life's journey. Each fork in the road forces us to choose one way over another. Grieve all you want about the road not taken, but you cannot travel both paths. When we say "*Yes*" to one option, we say "*No*" to all the others. This may be one of the toughest lessons of adulthood. No matter what the world preaches, we CANNOT have it all.

- *Either/or choices:* You cannot buy whatever your want whenever you like. Many families are paying the high price of high living with over-leveraged lifestyles. I tell college students to shred credit card applications, and I advise engaged couples to never charge more than they can pay off at the end of each month. It is never too early or too late to make wise financial choices and learn how to become Christian stewards of God's resources.

- *Either/or choices*: When a bride and groom say "*I do*" before God and company, they are saying "*I don't*" to everyone else. The Old Testament book of Proverbs says that infidelity is like putting a hot coal in your pocket. Yet people always act surprised when they get burned. Healthy, lasting marriages are based upon faithfulness and trust in good times and in bad.

- *Either/or choices:* Each person here receives twenty-four hours per day and seven days per week—a single second more cannot be bought at any price. Time spent on reality shows, soap operas, Internet sites, and video games cannot be shared with spouse, children, family, and friends.

- *Either/or choices:* When you have a baby, you have just committed the next eighteen years of your life to raising that child. Actually, this is not true—parenthood is a life sentence! You NEVER quit being a parent. If you had other plans, then get over it. Raising a child in the Christian faith is a parent's highest and holiest calling—everything else takes second place.

- *Either/or choices:* Weekend vacations, athletic activities, tennis tournaments, and golf trips can crowd out time for worship, Sunday School, Bible study, and Christian fellowship.

- *Either/or choices:* We can either pray *"My will be done"* or *"Thy will be done."*

In the New Testament book of James, the author reminds the church of the critical choices of life. He warns an unfaithful people: *"Don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God."* (James 4: 4) Pick, choose, decide, and elect: God or the world. You cannot have it both ways—you cannot have it all.

IV. Life's Direction

We really do live in an "either/or" world. Each of us must constantly choose between branching forks in the road. One path leads to another and then another. Some choices are seemingly minor while others appear major. Yet decisions have a way of building upon one another. Even the "small" choices accrue over time to a surprising sum. Daily decisions eventually determine a life's direction. Every choice has consequences. Our choices both reveal who we are and shape who we become.

So we obviously should take the right road and not the wrong one. To borrow a phrase from our teenagers: "DUH!" However, making the right choices is not always easy. The road to hell really is paved with good intentions. We intend to make the right choices and oftentimes even know what they are, but our sinful nature gets in the way. We find ourselves traveling the wrong paths. Jesus warned the crowds:

> *"Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it."* (Matthew 7: 13-14)

On occasion, we will all make the wrong choice. One of our hymns has the heartfelt lament: *"Prone to wander, Lord I feel it, prone to leave the God I love."* These words echo in all of our hearts. There ARE times when we willfully or ignorantly choose to travel the wrong road. Like a car badly out of alignment, we find our lives swerving away from the straight and narrow.

The good news is also that one wrong decision does not forever condemn us. We discover God's grace even along these ill-chosen pathways. Our Lord forgives our sin and calls us back to the Holy Spirit's straight and narrow way. And even if we pick one wrong trail, a lifelong process of seeking God's will, Word, and way for our lives will ultimately lead us in the right direction.

One of the amazing advances in technology is the **Global Positioning Systems** you can now buy for hiking or driving. The devices link up with orbiting satellites and can define your position within a few feet. A GPS can then direct you step-by-step or turn-by-turn to your desired destination.

In my experience, God does not give us a spiritual GPS that directs us every moment of life. Instead, we receive a **compass** that points to true north. We may make detours along the way, but we know that we are heading in the right direction—we are heading in God's direction.

The other good news is that choosing the narrow road one time makes it easier to choose it the next time. Right and righteous decisions build upon one another. Just like our bodies learn muscle memory through repeated exercise, so our minds and hearts can cultivate holiness through repeated effort.

Conclusion

In the Old Testament, **Joshua** led the people of Israel after Moses' death in the wilderness. The Twelve Tribes crossed the Jordan River, and God delivered His people into *"The Promised Land."* After years of conflict, they finally conquered the land. In his farewell address, Joshua spoke to the people at Shechem, rehearsing all that the Lord had done. He concluded by saying,

"Now fear the Lord and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshipped beyond the River and in Egypt and serve the Lord. But if serving the Lord seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord!" (Joshua 24: 14-15)

It is a dramatic scene in the Bible where the people face a clear choice for or against the Lord; and there are life-altering moments when we clearly choose between God and something else. Yet most of life is lived between these major crossroads, and we daily must choose which path to walk. Those small choices eventually do determine life's direction.

Robert Frost concluded his poem by writing:

"I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I,
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference."

Amen.