

Therefore Choose Life

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In the thirtieth chapter of Deuteronomy we read, “I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life” (19). With these words Moses challenged the children of Israel to renew their covenant with the Lord. We may have heard the same words earnestly addressed to us by parents, teachers, and church leaders. We know what they mean. Or do we? Perhaps we could gain by pondering them together one more time.

Gifts from God

When Moses stood before all Israel and said, “Therefore choose life,” he was only repeating what had first been heard by Adam: “Thou mayest choose for thyself, for it is given unto thee” (Moses 3:17). The word *choose* is not merely a command; it also refers to a power, a gift given from God. But if the power of choice is a gift given at birth, then what was the prophet’s purpose in saying, “Therefore choose life”? Just this: the gift can be kept only by being used. Choosing is like breathing. At birth we receive the breath of life. But we keep it only so long as we continually use it. In a physical sense, to stop breathing is to stop living. In a spiritual sense, to stop choosing is also to stop living, for living involves growth and development, and these

can come only by means of our free choices. That is why the power to choose is so precious.

We come to earth, then, with these two gifts of breath and choice, but they are not invulnerable. Our way of using them is just as important as our act of using them. If we protect and care for them, if we use them in pursuit of wholesome and holy ends, they will be our servants. But should we neglect them, we will not endure in health or peace for long. Our generation knows better than any other the diseases caused by foolishly abusing our powers of breath. In a similar way, spiritual life may be damaged by reckless choices. How long does it take, either way, to destroy these priceless gifts of God? No one knows. But who could ever sanely wish, in his own case, to find out?

Rules, Training, Discipline

In the course of life we have many goals or ends. Sometimes they conflict. To find harmony in our lives, we must have an ultimate end, one for the sake of which we make all our other choices. We here today have such an end.

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It is eternal life. But we know that not everyone shares that end. More specifically, we know that we face an adversary whose consuming purpose is our misery and death, and whose cunning is employed daily toward that end. In the awareness of that adversary and our peril, all the prophets have echoed the words of Moses to the children of Israel, “Therefore choose life.”

How, then, shall we choose life? We cannot choose it by acting on whim, rushing after every desire or appetite or passion that beckons to us. We choose life by following the right rules or laws. We first encounter rules as we seek to learn. They are given to us for our training. Following them helps us to develop discipline. In our earliest years our parents have charge of us and must teach us the rules we ought to follow. We are too young then to comprehend the full nature and purpose of the rules or the ends that following them will help us reach. We adopt the rules of our parents by imitation. Much later we come to see how rules and ends are linked and how following certain rules helps us to achieve certain ends.

Consider for a moment the three words I have used: rules, training, discipline. There are at least two areas in which many of you have learned to deal with sets of rules that are given for your training and discipline. The first area is athletics, the second is music. Those of you who have been athletes understand how rules, training, and discipline help you to achieve your end: being a successful athlete. When you are in training you are expected to follow the training rules and the discipline they involve. Suppose you stop by a friend’s place and the friend offers you a certain dessert. You reply, “No, thank you, I can’t eat that.”

“Can’t eat it?” says your friend. “It’s delicious. I made it myself.”

“Oh, I don’t question that,” you respond. “It’s just that I’m in training.”

“What’s that got to do with it?”

“Well, this isn’t on our training table; it’s not a part of our diet.” This response says nothing against the particular dessert in itself. That is beside the point. But you are in training, and that means you cannot eat certain foods—not if you want to remain committed to the team and its training rules. You did not create those rules. But you did choose for your end a particular sport. The coach, knowing that sport well, told you about the rules of training and the discipline that would be required of you. You wanted to be on the team, you wanted to play well—so you accepted the rules.

I think coaches generally do not encourage a lot of debate concerning training rules. They tolerate breaking those rules even less. You ate the wrong foods? You stayed up too late? You failed to appear at practice? Fine. Your resignation from the team is accepted. Another athlete is waiting to take your place. Once again, the point here is not the intrinsic value of a given food or bedtime. The point is that when you choose the sport or the team, you also choose the corresponding rules. To violate the rules is to violate your commitment to the end they serve.

In just the same way, a music student becomes subject to the rules of the music teacher. When the teacher lays down certain rules about how to hold the bow, or how to place the fingers, or how to position the wrist, the teacher knows that the rules will lead you to form the right habits and that if you form the wrong habits, your musical development can be blocked. Here too, if you show no effort to practice the rules your teacher gives you, you may find yourself soon looking for another teacher.

These few remarks about athletics and music were designed to show one thing: to choose the end is to choose the rules that lead to it. In other words, rules have a purpose, even when we do not fully understand what it is. When we try to choose an end and at the same time reject the rules that go with it, we

are really contradicting ourselves. We are trying to do what cannot be done.

I offer a final example of the union between rules and ends: the university honor code, especially the dress and grooming standards. This case resembles the two I have already given in an important way. That is, the issue does not in the first instance concern the merits of any particular rule or standard. The issue concerns only whether someone wants to be on this team or wants to study under this teacher. If the answer is yes, the answer is also yes to the corresponding rules.

If you choose to become a part of the BYU community, you choose to make the BYU rules become a part of you. And, I repeat, this choice exists quite apart from the nature of those rules. Learning the importance of rules and learning how to follow them faithfully are two of the most valuable aspects of general education because this knowledge is transferable. Once you know how rules, training, and discipline help lead you to a specific end, you can develop the proper procedure for achieving other ends. But with respect to our BYU rules of honor, there is this important difference. Not just the procedure but also the end is transferable. You may sometime stop being an active gymnast or cease playing in an orchestra, but you will never reach a point in your life when the code of honor and the goal of virtue cease to apply.

I have known a few students who looked forward to a time when they could leave at least the dress and grooming standards behind. But you should know that other institutions also concern themselves with matters of dress and grooming. For example, one of America's largest retail companies recently opened a new telecatalog center here in Provo. The employees meet their customers only on the telephone, but they are still expected to dress in a certain way, which is spelled out in detail: no denim is ever to be worn by anyone. Women wear dresses or skirts and blouses. Men wear dress

slacks, dress shirts, and ties. Dozens of other large companies have similar rules. They have them because they have found that these rules help them to achieve the end for which they are working. They have found that how people dress affects how people act.

Choosing the Law of Life

Now some people may say that talking about rules without talking about their specific content is one-sided. Some may point out that rules change over time. This is no doubt true. But the real issue is the principle of following rules. In the words of John Silber, president of Boston University, speaking in the context of widespread campus lawlessness in the late sixties, "The law is not worth changing unless lawfulness is worth preserving" That is a profound comment, which all who note or seek change should bear in mind. If we are not, in the first place, thoroughly committed to rules or to law, it will matter little, in the end, what the specific laws happen to be. Loyalty to lawfulness is fundamental.

I have tried to make clear the reason for rules and the way rules are linked to ends. Let me now return once more to the words of Moses, "I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing: therefore choose life." With respect to the rules or commandments of God, we know that without exception they have one fixed, unchanging purpose, and the choice that we must make is stark and clear: life or death, blessing or cursing. Through the Prophet Joseph Smith the Lord said,

Wherefore, verily I say unto you that all things unto me are spiritual, and not at any time have I given unto you a law which was temporal; neither any man, nor the children of men; neither Adam, your father, whom I created.

Behold, I gave unto him that he should be an agent unto himself; and I gave unto him commandment, but no temporal commandment gave I unto him, for my commandments are spiritual; they are

not natural nor temporal, neither carnal nor sensual. [D&C 29:34–35]

All the Lord’s commandments or rules or laws are spiritual. We find what it means in Romans: “To be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life” (8:6). The key to choosing rightly is to remember: To choose the end is to choose the law that leads to it. But just as truly, we now see, *to choose the law is to choose the end to which it leads.* Consider these words from section 88 of the Doctrine and Covenants:

And again, verily I say unto you, that which is governed by law is also preserved by law and perfected and sanctified by the same.

That which breaketh a law, and abideth not by law, but seeketh to become a law unto itself, and willeth to abide in sin, and altogether abideth in sin, cannot be sanctified by law, neither by mercy, justice, nor judgment. Therefore, they must remain filthy still. [34–35]

The Lord tells us that law is the means by which he seeks to raise up to eternal life in his presence, to be sanctified and perfected as he is. But we must choose life. He will not force, for the gift of spiritual freedom is one he will not take away. If we reject the law of life, offered for our own good, if we say no, then, in the current idiom, God himself can only reply, “Have it your way.”

No person can ever be better than the rule or law of his life. Find what that law is and you have found what the person is. It may not be a simple thing to discern the law of someone’s life. Often it takes a long period of watching. Once in a while some crucial event reveals it dramatically. But no one can rise higher than the law of his life. How important, then, to choose that law wisely.

Choosing the Master

I have spoken of rules or laws as essential elements in our decision to choose life. But they themselves are not the end we seek. They are the means for helping us to achieve it. The end is eternal life, or, more fully and correctly stated, eternal life in the presence of God our eternal Father and his Son, Jesus Christ. Our highest hope can never be separated from our hope to live with them. Finally, all rules come from a ruler, all laws come from a lawgiver. They always point to a person who gave them: the parent, the coach, the teacher, and, ultimately, the Lord. To choose life is to choose the law of life. To choose the law of life is to choose the Lord of Life who gave it. “I am come,” he said, “that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly” (John 10:10). The true end we seek, the true source of the eternal life we aspire to, is personal. “And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou has sent” (John 17:3).

Once we understand what eternal life is, then all the rules and laws of life can become stepping-stones that lead us safely and surely to the divine presence. In contemplating such thoughts as these, I am reminded of the title of a book I read a few years ago, a title that touched me as deeply as did its contents. It was a book by Elie Wiesel, winner of the Nobel Peace Prize. It told of some of the great teachers of eastern European Judaism. The title was *Somewhere a Master*. In those three words I seemed to feel the universal longing of the human heart for one who is better and wiser than we are, one who can be a guide, friend, teacher, one we can learn from, be like, please, follow, and love. I later was fortunate enough to meet the author. When Mr. Wiesel delivered a forum lecture at BYU, I was invited to introduce him and had the chance to talk with him before his lecture. Because I had once studied at the Jewish Theological Seminary of America

in New York, we had both some interests and some friends in common.

But I never met the man of whom he spoke with the greatest affection, Rabbi Saul Lieberman, probably the most gifted Talmud scholar in the world. He was already old when I was at the seminary and could devote only limited time to teaching a few advanced students. Elie Wiesel was one of these. He told me how he traveled to New York every month to meet with his master and how he studied the sacred words of their faith with him. Listening to a man who was himself a master, speaking reverently of his own master, was a moving and unforgettable experience.

The conversation reminded me anew that all learning, all laws, all ends, and all life are finally personal. Though we grope and wander, waiting for each of us somewhere is the person who lifted the heart of Mary just by speaking her name and led her to forget the empty tomb and greet the promise of life with her answer, "Rabboni; which is to say, Master" (John 20:16).

Those few moments with one of the great human beings of our time later drew my mind to a former time and to a passage from the final words of King Benjamin, one of the most vividly personal rulers in all the Book of Mormon: "How knoweth a man the master whom he has not served, and who is a stranger unto him, and is far from the thoughts and intents of his heart?" (Mosiah 5:13). That

question is the ultimate question that each one of us must ask and answer. Have we found, somewhere, the Master?

In all our comings and goings, in the midst of all our goal settings and achievements, have we known him? Have we served him? Is he near our hearts? Have we written in our memories the fervent words of Moroni as he ended his record: "Yea, come unto Christ, and be perfected in him, and deny yourselves of all ungodliness" (Moroni 10:32)? I pray that if we have not, we will, starting this very day.

When Joshua, following the pattern of Moses, gave his last counsel to Israel, he said, "Choose you this day whom ye will serve" (Joshua 24:15). What day is *this day*? Surely every day is this day. What we chose yesterday, if we chose well, we must renew again this day. And what we chose that was wrong, we must admit and amend this day.

As we strive to place Christ at the center of our lives, he has promised as our Master to make us his servants and also his friends, and to share with us the eternal life that he died to gain. There is no higher end than this, that we should choose to accept his discipline, become his disciples, and do his work throughout our lives. Nothing else, no other choice, can make of us what he can.

Let us this day choose him, knowing that as we do, we choose life. And let us then trust that we in turn shall be chosen of him, I pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.