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MAKING SPIRITUAL CHOICES

Everyone makes choices. Spiritual choices need to be the highest priority. Look at choices which will bring the greatest personal benefits, enrich lives, bless families, build up the nation and extend the kingdom of God.

Have you thought about choices you make? Based on 30 plus years of counseling and helping people understand God's way for their lives, I have concluded many people often do not 'connect the dots' between choices and consequences. There is very little difference between religious and non-religious people. The reality is many people have never really experienced God personally.

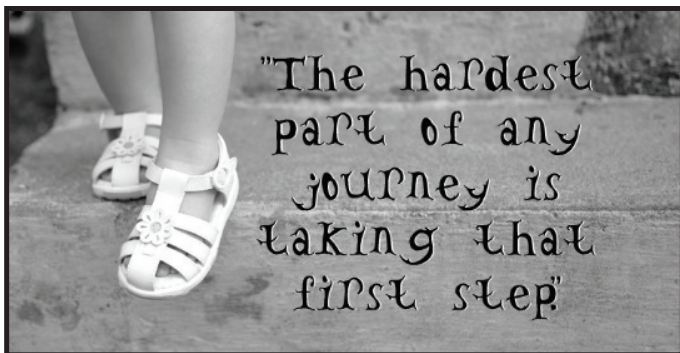


Let us take a look at choices and their results. The Scriptures say: *“God’s divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence”* (2 Peter 1:3) Notice the conjunction *“and”* which connects life with godliness. God has all power. through his word (the Scriptures) to give us all things that will help us. Our choices are interconnected to our growth in life. Are your choices helping you mature in godliness (which results in peace and joy) or leading you to confusion, distress and chaos?

Many choices have spiritual effects whether we realize it or not. Scripture says *“For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made”* (Romans 1:20). The beauty and orderliness of creation leads us to acknowledge there is a Creator of all things who appreciates harmony. So, when we make moral choices, it has a profound impact on us. The choices we make can bring us closer to God and godly peace, but choices that take us away from God have an effect -- producing frustration and chaos. For the sake of ourselves and our families it is vital that we make choices that please God.

— Tim Bonzagni,
Warwick, Rhode Island

CHANGING ME, OR GOD?



When it comes to the need for change, we often find ourselves trying to change others (including God) rather than ourselves. The fact is, God does not change. He says, “*For I the Lord do not change...*” (Malachi 3:6). He does not need to change because He is perfect. The simple truth is, when change is needed

the first and most important place to look is in the mirror. Whether you are a spiritual skeptic, a seeker for truth, a dedicated Christian, a struggling church member or someone who is wavering in your faith, you already sense in your heart that something is wrong, something is missing, change needs to take place. Change is needed but seldom easy,

The apostle Paul reveals where change must begin: “*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind...*” (Romans 12:2). Pressure! We all experience pressure to conform and go along with the crowd. 1 Corinthians 15:33 reads, “*Do not be deceived: ‘Bad company ruins good morals.’*” This world in which we find ourselves does not accept the will of God as its guide; but rather, it is self-seeking. And as James writes, “*whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God*” (James 4:4). We must resist conforming, for it never ends well.

Any choice we make needs to have God at its center. This can only happen if we allow God to transform us “*by the renewing of your minds.*” This renewal enables the believer to “*discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect*” (Romans 12:2). We are encouraged to “*try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord*” (Ephesians 5:10). We should think as Jesus did when He said, “*For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me*” (John 6:38).

Our will is often the obstacle which we stumble over when it comes to change in our lives. When we put God first, change that is pleasing to Him becomes possible. For He has provided us with instructions to guide us towards change. “*All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work*” (2nd Timothy 3:16-17). And he has given us even more: the strength to sustain our changes.

God is ready to help make the changes you need to make, if you will seek him. The question is, are you ready to let him help you?

— Dennis Godin
Biddeford, Maine

MATERIAL god OR TRUE GOD ?

Even those who have little interest in religion have noticed the trend towards materialism in our culture and are disturbed by it. In our attempt to make things easier for our children and for ourselves, we have become encumbered with all of kinds of things. Many measure the value of their lives by wealth and possessions. We seek things, want them, convince ourselves that we need them. We make up reasons to justify our desires and purchases. In reality, our society worships its stuff.



A “god” is not necessarily a deity like the mythological Greek gods Zeus or Poseidon. A “god” is what we serve or desire above all else. It is what we give ourselves to and ascribe top importance or value to. It’s what we consider to be life’s priority, highest desire, first place in our pursuits. For many, materialism has replaced the true God. Things have become “god.”

The Apostle Paul, wrote, *“For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things”* (Philippians 3:18-19). Scripture says their god was their appetite, what they hungered for. They had made that the top priority of life. Material things had become “god.”

What do you treasure most? Paul once treasured many things, but he wrote, *“Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ”* (Philippians 3:4-7). What do you treasure?

In His sermon on the mount, Jesus taught that those who *“hunger and thirst for righteousness will be satisfied”* (Matthew 5:6). He said: *“Lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also”* (Matthew 6:19-21). He asked this important question: *“For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?”* (Matthew 16:26).

— Paul Cowles
Horseheads, New York

PENANCE

Some religious groups practice penance as a sacrament which follows confession of sins. One person described “penance” like this: “I can remember as a boy, going into the confessional and having the priest give me an assignment -- and it could very well be something like, “Say 5 *Our Fathers* and 10 *Hail Marys*”. Then I would



PENANCE OR REPENTANCE?

kneel down on the steps leading up to the platform of the altar. I would say my 5 *Our Fathers* and 10 *Hail Marys*, and that was my penance.” Penance is what this young man did to take action that showed he was sorry for his sins. While the practice of prescribing “penance” may seem an appropriate sign of sorrow, we should understand that penance is not mentioned in the New Testament. Penance was not commanded by Jesus and it was not practiced by the early disciples we read about in the Bible. Is it possible that the sacrament of penance is actually contrary to salvation by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8-9)?

REPENTANCE

Scripture has much to teach about repentance. Jesus came “to call sinners to repentance” (Luke 5:32). The word itself actually means, “to turn, to change”. It is not the same thing as feeling sorry that one has sinned, but godly sorrow (a change of mind) can lead to repentance -- a change of behavior. (2 Corinthians 7:10). One who repents may not be able to undo all the things he has “messed up” in life. However, one can receive a “clean slate,” and start afresh. As far as “penance” is concerned, this is purely a man-made idea. The Bible gives no “formula” of words to speak following confession of sins. Christians you read about in the Bible did not confess their sins to a priest, but to one another. (James 5:16) The grace and love of God should be the focus of forgiveness rather than formulas, rituals and self-mortifications. Denying oneself the joys of marriage and abstaining from foods “which God has created to be received by thanksgiving” may be demanded as a man-appointed penance, but such things are not required by God (1 Timothy 4:1-4). Requiring more than simply turning from sinful things, confessing those sins to the Lord (and to those against whom one has sinned), and committing one’s life to Jesus Christ in immersion-baptism (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3-4) is requiring more than Jesus Himself commanded. After baptism when the early Christians sinned, they were not sent to a priest to be given a penance to perform, but to “repent and pray” for forgiveness of their sins (Acts 8:22).

Penance leaves a person wondering “Have I done enough to satisfy God’s anger?” “Have I prayed hard enough and long enough?” “Have I given enough money to the church?” “Have I restricted my food enough?”

Continued on page 5 

OLD LIFE or NEW LIFE?

The most important decision you will ever make is to leave your old life behind and find a new life in Jesus Christ. Jesus wants to give you the life that is “*life indeed*” (John 10:10). He paid the price to set you free from the past, to forgive your sins, to free you from the power of Satan, and to fill you with peace, love and hope -- a “*new birth*,” a new start (John 3:3-5).

- **Give yourself to Him in sincere faith.** “*Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ*” (Acts 16: 31). That means to trust Him, lean on Him, commit yourself to Him in every way.
- **Living faith includes repenting of your sins.** Scripture says God “*commands all people everywhere to repent*” (Acts 17:31).
- **Make the good confession that “Jesus Christ is the Lord”** (Romans 10:9).
- **Be baptized (immersed) for the “forgiveness of sins”** (Acts 2:38). You will enter “*into Christ*” and rise from the waters of baptism to “*walk in newness of life*” (Romans 6:3-4).



Want to leave the old life behind and start a new life? We can help.

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this issue of “Christ for Today”
(See page 8). Do it today.**

PENANCE OR REPENTANCE (Continued from page 4)

Repentance motivates one to stop sinful behavior. From now on one wants to live differently. He surrenders his heart and body to do what pleases the Lord. Forgiveness means he is restored to the Lord. He does not have to earn it; he does not have to be punished. He does not have to deny himself the innocent joys of life. He does not have to mortify himself. The blood of Jesus Christ has washed his sins away. He has been cleansed from every act of rebellion against his heavenly Father, and his sins though once red like crimson have been made as “*white as snow*” (Isaiah 1:18).

In reality, the sacrament of penance trivializes sin. What is needed is not penance on the steps of an altar. What is needed is faithful obedience to Jesus Christ from a heart made pure through Jesus’ blood.

— David Tarbet
New Milford, Connecticut

TIME OR ETERNITY?



Our Heavenly Father created us as human beings. Every one of our lives is lived out in increments of time. From the moment we are born to the moment we leave this earthly existence our lives are lived by a ticking clock that counts down our time upon earth.

Jesus' parable describes a rich man whose land and crops brought him great wealth to the point where he didn't have enough room to store all his crops. His time on earth was going great! He thought to himself, "*What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?*" *And he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns, and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry''*" (Luke 12:13-21).

But there was just one problem! He thought he had all the time in the world to do whatever he wanted to do but something happened. All his gathering of wealth, all his foolish planning and looking to the future disappeared in an instant, because time on this earth is not infinite and his time was up! God said to him, "*Fool! This night your soul is required of you; and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?*"

Just like the rich man, most people choose this world and its pleasures without considering that, "*it is appointed unto man once to die and after that the judgment*" (Hebrews 9:27). There are no second chances!

But what an incredible joy and blessing it is that our Heavenly Father has opened a pathway into eternity. He gives all men opportunity to turn from the world and its temptations and to put on Christ in baptism. In that commitment of our lives to him we gain a completely new perspective...an eternal one! The Apostle Paul tells us, "*So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal*" (2 Corinthians 4:16-18).

What a blessing it is to lead our lives for Jesus in this life and then have the glory of going Home to be blessed for all eternity.

— Randy Gardner
Quechee, Vermont

HOPE OR DESPAIR?

This world is full of reasons to despair. The economy, wars, disasters, social decay, political upheaval, and the list could go on. Many people have dropped into hysterical anxiety attacks looking at all the negativity and problems in the world. But what if there is another option? What if you could make choices that lead to hope instead of despair? Consider some options.

One choice that impacts whether we go toward hope or despair involves how we choose to fill our minds. If we choose to spend all our time watching the news, and reading about tragedies, then we are choosing despair. Instead we should choose to fill our minds with the knowledge of God!

In Ephesians 1:17-18 Paul prays that God would give his readers a spirit of wisdom and the knowledge of God. He writes:

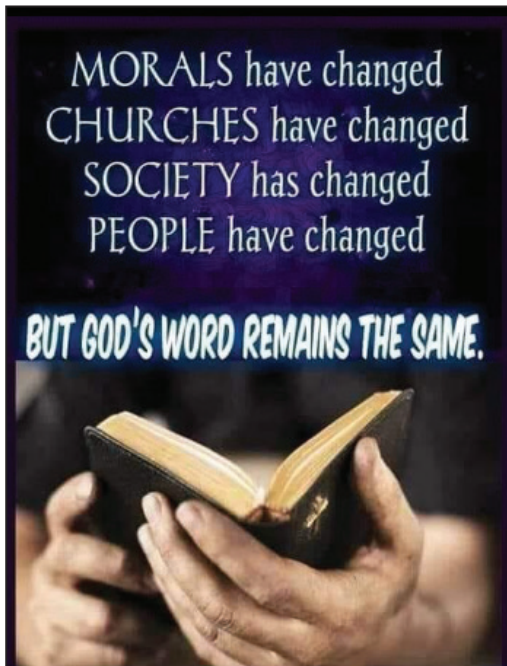
“Having the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints.” By choosing to fill our minds with God’s word we can know what hope God offers.

Another choice involves where we look for security. The world pushes us to seek security in money, jobs, and possessions. However, all those things wear out or become quickly lost. Instead, we should seek security in God.

How do we set our hope on God? The following verses tell us to be rich in good works, be generous and to share. We set our hope in God by choosing to obey Him. *“As for the rich in this present age, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but on God, who richly provides us with everything to enjoy. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, to be generous and ready to share, thus storing up treasure for themselves as a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of that which is truly life”* (1 Timothy 6:17-19).

God provides an unshakable foundation. When we put our hope in him we truly have hope.

Because of the blood of Christ, you can draw near to God and have hope! The biggest choice you can make that leads to hope is becoming a Christian. I encourage you to contact the congregation that sent this mailer to learn more about salvation!



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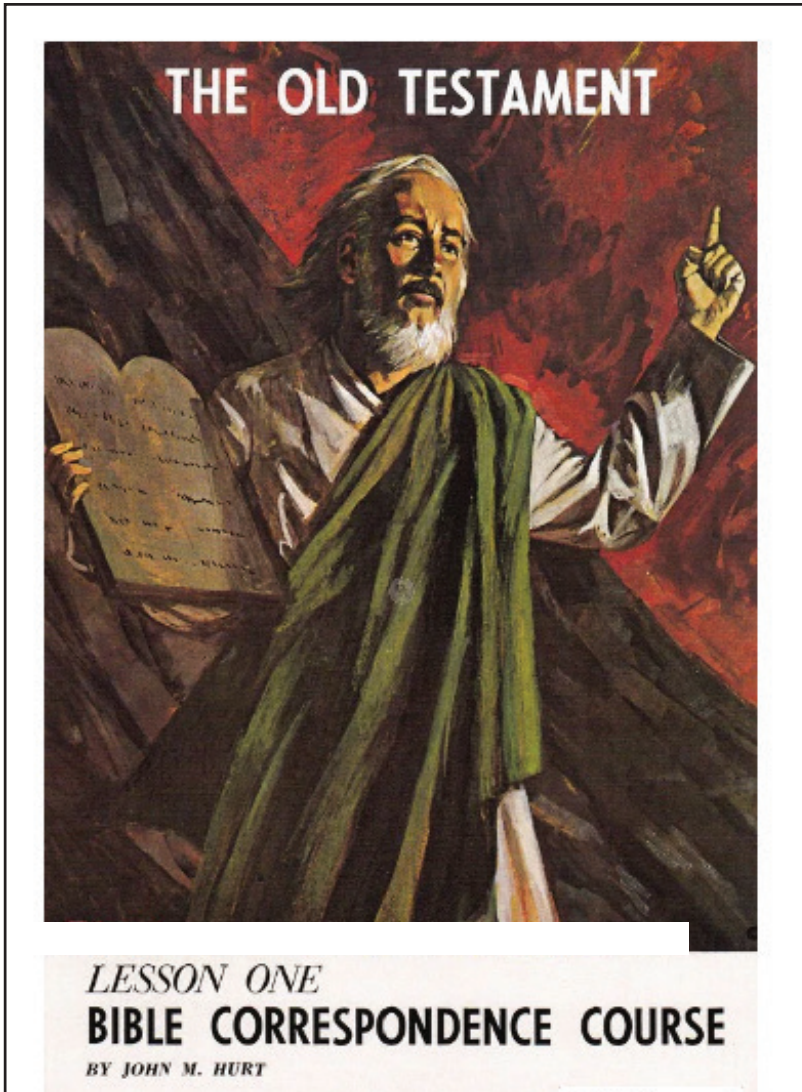
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