

CRUCIAL CHOICES

Matthew 5:14-16

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Matthew 5:14-16 (The Message)

You're here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We're going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don't think I'm going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I'm putting you on a light stand. Now that I've put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine! Keep open house, be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you'll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.

In the last month our world has been faced with crucial choices about finances, leadership, and power. People scrambled to move money from one investment to another, trying to hold on to financial security. Citizens of the United States were faced with whom to vote for in the latest presidential election. Governments in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, Afghanistan, India and the Middle East continued to be faced with violence and death in the struggle for power and control.

Lives changed overnight. Fortunes were lost. One Political party gained ground, the other lost ground. People were injured or died as wars escalated.

All results of crucial choices.

Which led me to ask myself the question: Where is my faith when I'm faced with a critical choice?

Whether I am voting for a presidential candidate, investing money in a particular stock, or concerned about justice in other parts of the world, am I taking action that is based on my relationship with God? Did I go and seek God's face, God's wisdom, for this particular dilemma? Or have I been relying on what the world says . . . through the media, world leaders, non-profit organizations, and other opinions expressed around me?

Certainly I need to be informed about the issues of my world. I need to read and investigate the data available to me. But am I also going back to Scripture, to what God says about these issues? Am I looking for God's answers as fervently as I soak up the world's answers?

Because how I live my life is a testimony of what I believe about God.

What about you? Is your life a testimony for God?

If someone asked you about why you voted for Barak Obama, or for John McCain, would your answer be based on what you believe about God, or on what you believe about either man? If someone asked you about your reaction to the financial world crisis, would your answer be based on what you believe about God, or on your knowledge of the stock market? If someone asked you about the violence in the Middle East, would your answer be based on what you believe about God, or on the opinions expressed in the latest debate by so-called experts?

How you live your life is a testimony of what you believe about God.

Martin Luther King Jr. tells the famous story about his “kitchen table” conversion in the middle of the night after his home had been firebombed. He tells of how his liberal and intellectual faith became much more real and concrete as he cried out to God in fear and distress. Ideas about religion would no longer be enough for King, as his life and that of his family sleeping in the next room were now at stake. God had to be personal now and very real.

I think many of us can relate to King’s experience. When we’re in the middle of a life-threatening crisis, then what we believe about God becomes more real and concrete. A crisis of health. A crisis of relationship. A crisis of financial loss. A crisis of employment. A crisis of death of a loved one. A crisis of re-location. A crisis of purpose. In those moments when life seems to be hanging in the balance, when our emotional/psychological well-being seems to be hanging in the balance, then what we believe about God comes sharply into focus.

Last February, when David was facing double by-pass surgery, I asked myself: Do I *really* believe in a God that can heal? Do I *really* believe in a God that will be beside David during the surgery? If David dies, do I *really* believe that he’ll immediately be with Jesus in heaven? If David dies, do I *really* believe in a God who will continue to take care of me and the boys? Do I *really* believe God will give me peace no matter what happens? These were important questions to ask myself, to examine critically . . . especially since many of David’s family do not profess a belief in Jesus. How I lived my life in the days before and after David’s surgery would be a testimony of what I believed about God. Would people see Jesus shining through me? Or, would they just see me having a crisis? I wanted them to see Jesus.

It is during these critical moments that I realize that my faith doesn't rest in a concept or an idea, but in a person—God himself. And what I believe about God and how I view my relationship with God, impacts my life choices.

Faith is not just a Sunday morning event. God wants his relationship with you to be wrapped around every aspect of your life: your business, your marriage, your relationship with your kids, your political views, your financial decisions, your friendships, your social activities, and so on. God is seeking a real, intimate, thriving relationship that changes your life.

And once God is sewn into the very fabric of who we are, what we do, where we go, how we make choices . . . then bold acts may be required of us.

Former South African Bishop Desmond Tutu is a Christian, and found his Christian faith challenged again and again as he fought against apartheid. He was imprisoned, tortured, ridiculed, and slandered during the years he spoke out against apartheid. The South African government was constantly harassing him, following him, recording his words and sermons in order to imprison him.

Once, he was preaching a sermon at an ecumenical service at the Cathedral of St. George when the notorious South African Security Police broke into the service. Desmond Tutu stopped preaching and just looked at the intruders as they lined the walls of his cathedral, wielding writing pads and tape recorders for any bold prophetic utterances. They had already arrested Tutu and other church leaders just a few weeks before and kept them in jail for several days to make both a statement and a point: Religious leaders who take on the leadership roles in the struggle against apartheid will be treated like any other opponents of the Pretoria Regime.

After meeting their eyes with his in a steely gaze, Archbishop Tutu acknowledged their power (“You are powerful, very powerful”) but then he reminded them that he served a higher power greater than their political authority (“But I serve a God who cannot be mocked!”). Then, in the most extraordinary challenge to political tyranny ever witnessed, Archbishop Tutu told the representatives of South African apartheid, “Since you have already lost, I invite you today to come and join the winning side!”

He said it with a smile on his face and enticing warmth in his invitation, but with a clarity and boldness that took everyone's breath away. The congregation's response was electric. The crowd was literally transformed by the bishop's challenge to power. From a cowering fear of the heavily armed security forces that

surrounded the cathedral and greatly outnumbered the band of worshipers, the congregation literally leaped to their feet, shouted the praises of God and began dancing. (What is it about dancing that enacts and embodies the spirit of hope?) They danced out of the cathedral to meet the awaiting police and military forces of apartheid who hardly expected a confrontation with dancing worshipers. Not knowing what else to do, they backed up to provide the space for the people of faith to dance for freedom in the streets of South Africa.

What gave Archbishop Tutu the boldness to speak such courageous words? His faith was grounded in a vibrant relationship with the living God. His faith wasn't something he only visibly showed on Sundays or only with his other Christian friends. His faith, his relationship with Jesus, was an active part of every life decision. He knew what Scripture, what God's Word, said about slavery, freedom, and equality. He knew without a shadow of a doubt that he was already on the winning side. So with determination, yet gentleness, with boldness, yet sincerity, he invited the enemy soldiers to join him in the fight against apartheid.

How you live your life is a testimony of what you believe about God.

Jim Wallis, founder of Sojourners, a nationwide network of progressive Christians working for justice and peace, was in the congregation that afternoon when Archbishop Desmond Tutu made his bold statement to the South African Police: "Since you have already lost, I invite you today to come and join the winning side!" He says: "I think it is significant that many leaders in the most oppressive circumstances find themselves going more deeply into their faith, becoming more personal about relationship to God, and even more orthodox in their religious convictions." And he discovered that his exposure to these types of Christians began to impact his faith in a significant way. He too began to be more bold in the face of critical choices. His conversations became less academic and more tangible in regards to issues of faith.

He shares: I remember a conversation with friends who were biblical scholars from a more liberal tradition than mine. We shared so much. They too saw the gospel as offering a fundamental alternative to the political idolatries and oppressions of our age. But they questioned me on my theology concerning the resurrection of Christ. "Your belief in the resurrection is more literal than ours," they said. "Ours is more metaphorical. But we come out at the same place politically. Is that alright?"

It is at this point in the conversation that the liberal/evangelical debate about the resurrection usually begins. But that debate is often a mostly intellectual one, with heady arguments flying back and forth, and usually ends up quite unresolved. Their sincere question prompted a different response in me. I simply asked a question back, “In the heat of South Africa’s oppression and the heart of apartheid’s despair, do you think that a merely metaphorical resurrection would have been enough for Archbishop Desmond Tutu? It wouldn’t have been for me.” Mere intellectual debates aren’t enough when it comes to faith. It is what we face in our real lives and in the real world that has the most capacity to deepen our faith.

Over the last several weeks many of us were praying for the protection and release of Pastor Manuel Tec, a San Diego pastor abducted in Tijuana on October 21. Released on October 31 eleven days later, he began to share about his ordeal as he recovered in the hospital. During his capture, Pastor Tec was handcuffed and bound with a ragged chain, beat with barbed wire when he prayed or attempted to speak about God, his whole head was wrapped in duct tape except for his mouth and nose, at one point acid was thrown in his eyes, he was kept in a cage and not given food or water. He was told his entire family had been killed, and then he heard his captors speak of getting rid of him. They transported him to the outskirts of town, covered him alive in a shallow grave, and proceeded to fire bullets at him. But not one bullet touched his body. However, when the kidnappers saw no movement, they left him for dead. Shortly afterwards, Pastor Tec was discovered by local authorities and taken to a hospital.

Delirious and hallucinating from lack of food and water, Pastor Tec did not know where he was or immediately recognize his family when they came to visit. It was only after three days of care that he began to stabilize.

I’m sure as Pastor Tec lay huddled in that cage, his head wrapped in duct tape, his body in agony from the lashes of barbed wire, he was not praying to a Jesus that he thought had *metaphorically* risen from the dead. No, his faith was grounded in a belief that Jesus had actually risen from the dead, a Jesus that had triumphantly defeated death, a Jesus that had promised to be with him always, a Jesus that had forgiven his sins and promised him eternal life, a Jesus whose love was as real to him as the earthly love of his wife. In those moments of torture, I’m sure that Jesus was not an abstract idea to Pastor Tec, but a living person who was his Lord and Savior.

After his release Pastor Tec said, “I am alive, I believe, because God heard the prayers of his people. I praise God for sparing my life. My family and I are closer because of the trauma I endured. I praise God for his faithfulness.”

How we live our lives is a testimony of what we believe about God.

This morning, as we gather with other believers, we are in a safe place to explore & deepen our relationship with God, to praise God, to glorify his name. But what happens when we exit the doors of Crossroads? Do we let the faith we express inside these walls guide our decisions outside these walls? Does the way you live in the world reveal a person who seeks the face of God? Do your choices reflect those of a Godly person?

The last several weeks have once again revealed that we live in an unstable world. The foundations of the financial world, political world, and social world can crumble in an instant. Many people are making desperate choices. Choices based on fear and anxiety. Many people are placing their hopes for a better tomorrow on the feats of human leaders, instead of the one true God. Many people have turned to violence to solve issues of injustice. But those of us who hope in the Lord place our faith in the God that is steadfast, whose mercies are new every morning.

Psalm 102:25-26a says: “In the beginning you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you remain.”

Isaiah 55:10 says, “Though the mountains be shaken and the hills removed, yet my unfailing love for you will not be shaken nor my covenant of peace be removed,” says the Lord, who has compassion on you.

And Psalm 62:1-2 gives this assurance: “My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from him. He alone is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I will never be shaken.

Whatever personal crisis is before you . . .

Whatever world crisis alarms you . . .

Know this . . . we cannot be shaken if we are rooted in relationship with God.

We are light-bearers for Jesus. He put us on a light stand to shine.

Therefore, may our lives be a testimony of what we believe.

Amen.

Resources:

God's Politics by Jim Wallis, "The Critical Choice," pages 347-349, San Francisco: Harper Collins. 2005. Story of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, Martin Luther King Jr., and Jim Wallis & the resurrection.

Southern Baptist Pastor Freed, Hospitalized After Kidnapping by Mickey Noah, November 1, 2008. www.bpnews.net.

Email letter from Richard F. Vera of Multi Ethnic Evangelism concerning interview with Pastor Manuel Tec. November 1, 2008.

Experiencing God Workbook by Henry T. Blackaby and Claude V. King. "The Crisis of Faith," pages 108-125, TN: Lifeway Press, 1990.