

In the ✠ name of Jesus. Amen.

“Hence, all earthly treasure! Jesus is my pleasure, Jesus is my choice. . . . Pain or loss, Or shame or cross, Shall not from my Savior move me Since He deigns to love me.” These are some words from the well-known hymn “Jesus, Priceless Treasure” LSB743. I do like the 1927 Evangelical Lutheran Hymn-book translation of that stanza better: *“Wealth, I will not heed thee, Wherefore should I need thee? Jesus is my Joy!”* And although my German is not all that good, I do believe that *“Jesu, meine Lust!”* is better translated, *“Jesus, my Joy.”* Still we are left with *“Jesus is my choice,”* in our hymnals.

I didn’t choose it this Sunday, and maybe I should have, but maybe you experience the confusion when we sing: *“Lord, ’tis not that I did choose Thee; That, I know, could never be; For this heart would still refuse Thee Had Thy grace not chosen me”* LSB573. You can see the confusion: *“Lord, I didn’t choose You,”* and yet *“Jesus is my choice.”*

And then, of course, we hear Moses say to us today in our Old Testament lesson, *“choose life.”* And in the Epistle, we hear Paul write to Philemon about doing good *“of your own free will.”* Did you hear that? You’ve got to choose *“of your own free will”*? Interestingly, newer versions of the ESV translate that Philemon verse *“of your own accord,”* but for this sermon, we’re going to translate κατὰ ἐκούσιον *“of your own free will.”* And finally Jesus says to His disciples: *“Count the cost of being one of my disciples.”*

Could all of this possibly mean that we, in some way, choose to believe in Jesus? And therefore, does this mean that sinful men cooperate with God in their salvation? That men by their own free will can make up their own minds to become a Christian or not, as Charles Finney and other American revivalists taught?

In fact, asking this question revives a Reformation debate between Luther and the Roman Catholic scholar Erasmus. Erasmus had written a Diatribe or Discourse on Free Will, and Luther responded with his famous *On the Bondage of the Will*. You have some of Luther’s response in your What Luther Says insert.

Again, the question is, in Luther’s words, *“whether or not the will does any thing in those things which pertain unto Salvation.”* Those who say, as Erasmus does, *“yes, it does,”* are called *“synergists,”* those who believe we work together with God to effect our salvation. We, on the other hand, are Divine monergists. *“Mono”* — one — God alone saves us, apart from our willing it. That is, we say, no, our will does not participate in the *“things which pertain unto Salvation.”* Specifically, these passages before us today regarding choice and free will do not pertain to us choosing or deciding for ourselves to be saved.

Indeed, when Moses is proclaiming the Lord's word, he is doing it as the Israelites, that is, God's chosen people, were preparing to cross the Jordan and enter into the promised land. Moses is talking to the faithful whom God had chosen for Himself, the offspring of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob. He had saved them by bringing them out of bondage to the Egyptians with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. He had baptized them as they passed through the waters of the Red Sea. He had given them the Law and made a covenant of blood with them. He had gone before them all the 40 years of wilderness wandering that resulted from doubting God's providential care.

Moses is not talking to the unconverted here, trying to convince them to trust the Lord. Rather, Moses is talking to the church, saying "*The Lord has set before you a contrast: life and death, good and evil, blessing and curse.*" And he exhorts them to "*choose life,*" for God desires righteousness, righteous living from people accounted righteous by faith. It's no different for us today, as St. Paul says, God in Christ Jesus "*redeem[ed] us from all lawlessness and [purified] for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works*" (Titus 2:14). And indeed, "*God ... works in you ... to will*" it (Phil 2:13), even if you don't always do it. That is, our regenerate will—our will that has been truly set free—can cooperate, not in our salvation, but in the choice to do good.

Thus St. Paul, as he exhorts Philemon to take back Onesimus, Philemon's runaway slave, is not trying to convert Philemon. Rather, Paul is asking Philemon, the believer, to act according to that same regenerate will and to do what is right: not only take Onesimus back, but receive him as a brother and no longer a slave. This is the context of that free will reference.

And as Jesus teaches us today in the Gospel lesson, asking us to count the cost of being disciples, note that He is not telling us how we become disciples. We know how that's done: "*Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you*" (Matt. 28:19). Again, we know that those who are saved are those who call "*on the name of the Lord,*" that is, they "*confess with [their] mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in [their] heart that God raised him from the dead*" (Rom. 10:9, 13). These are truly Jesus' disciples, for this faith only comes by abiding in Jesus' word (John 8:31)—faith comes "*by hearing the word of Christ*" (Rom. 10:17). And this is completely free, by grace alone, apart from our works.

But discipleship makes demands. Following Jesus has costs. "*If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.*" "Hate" is a pretty strong word, and it's not the only place Jesus uses it. In John's Gospel,

Jesus said, “*whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life*” (John 12:25). You see, even if we understand Jesus’ words in Luke “*does not hate*” as Matthew records them, “*Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me,*” know that there is a cost to this kind of fidelity: scorn, ridicule, persecution, and even death. But remember, Jesus says that by believing in Him, the Resurrection and the Life, “*though [you] die, yet shall [you] live*” (John 11:25).

“*Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple,*” says Jesus. You see, being a Christian is not like being a member of some posh country club. Discipleship means suffering; there is a cost. Discipleship is not about a namby-pamby “*God without wrath [bringing] men without sin into a Kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a Cross,*” to use the phrase of H. Richard Niebuhr. No, “*[Christ] himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness*” (1 Pet. 2:24), that is, that we might bear the cross and come after Him, our wisdom and righteousness and sanctification and redemption (1 Cor. 1:30).

Jesus says, “*any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.*” For all of our earthly treasure can be destroyed or stolen away, but trusting Christ Jesus, we have a heavenly treasure awaiting us, which cannot be destroyed. It will not be taken away. There is a cost to discipleship in this life, but there are eternal benefits: forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation.

So God has set before you a choice; in fact, you have lots of choices all the time. It’s not to make a decision for Jesus— “*Lord, ’tis not that I did choose Thee, that, I know, can never be*” (John 15:16)—for Jesus has already chosen you before the world was made (Eph. 1:4-5), and has made you His disciples by Holy Baptism (Matt. 28:19). But as Moses did to Israel and as St. Paul did to Philemon, today Jesus is calling you to make a choice: to live as God’s holy people, redeemed by the blood of Jesus, priceless treasure, with a will no longer bound to sin, but set free to serve Christ and neighbor, offering up your sacrifices to Him, proclaiming His excellencies (1 Pet. 2), doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with your God (Mic. 5), the way of life and good and blessing (Deut. 30).

And when you fail to do the good that you will to do and instead do the bad that you will not to do—for in this life our will is not perfected—cry out for mercy as the wretched sinners that you are, and trust again in God through Jesus Christ your Lord, who has delivered you from this body of death (Rom. 7). And then come and eat the Supper He gave you, to be strengthened in your discipleship.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.