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THE ISSUE OF CHOICE

Introduction

In this second part of the message (2TS03b), I wish to discuss the third major issue that arose from our reflection on Genesis 3:6, and that is: The issue of choice.

Choice refers to the genuine ability of man to choose between alternatives and the ability to choose other than what he has chosen. This is fundamental to the way God has created us as moral beings. It is vital for moral and spiritual development and the fulfilment of God's intentions for our lives and why we can be held responsible for our actions. If we have a better understanding of the implications and the attacks in this area, we will be in a better position to properly exercise this freedom of choice that God has given us rather than allowing it to become a problem area.

Temptation of Adam and Eve: No Compulsion to Obey or Disobey

It is clear from the scene in the Garden of Eden that Eve was neither under compulsion to obey or disobey God. Eve could either yield to the temptation or reject it. She was not under compulsion either way and that is the meaning of the freedom of choice that man has.

However, we can become very vulnerable if we entertain temptations. We see this in the case of Eve. Genesis 3:6 does not simply tell us that she ate the fruit. It records for us how she saw that the tree was good for food, a delight to the eyes and desirable to make one wise, in the context of Satan seeking to tempt her. It was while entertaining Satan's temptation that Eve ate the forbidden fruit and sinned against God.

If we are not healthy in our attitudes and ways and we entertain temptations, we may find ourselves in a situation where yielding to temptation can become almost like a compulsion.

In the case of Adam, he had the freedom of choice too. He could choose to obey or to disobey God. He was not under compulsion to act either way.

Meaning of Man's Capacity to Choose

God has created man with the capacity to choose. This is a vital quality in man and is essential to him as a moral being. It is this capacity for choice that gives us quality in living. The very essence of a moral act has to do with this freedom of choice. If man has no freedom of choice, his actions will not have moral quality. For instance, we cannot say that an action is praiseworthy or blameworthy if the person doing it cannot choose to do otherwise and does it under compulsion because there will be no real moral meaning in the action.

This can take place, for example, if a stronger man were to forcibly take hold of the hand of a weaker man and use it to slap another man. The weaker man cannot be blamed for slapping the man because it was done under compulsion. He could not choose to do otherwise. It is just like programming a computer or a robot to move in a particular way. That movement does not have a moral quality in it because the robot is just doing what it has been programmed to do.

Likewise, there is no moral quality behind various things that we observe in nature like how the sun and the moon shine, as these things take place without the freedom of choice. It is not appropriate for us to praise the sun for shining even though we benefit from it. Rather, we praise God for what He has created and thank Him for His provision.

When the Scriptures records that man has been created in the image of God, a very important aspect is the moral capacity of man and his ability to make moral choices. And because we have the capacity to choose, God can hold us accountable. We are held responsible for the way we exercise our choice and for the consequences of our actions.

The Bible talks about reward and punishment. These concepts have meaning only because we have the freedom to choose. If we have no freedom to choose, reward or punishment does not have meaning because we cannot be responsible for what we did not choose. For example, it would be wrong to punish a man because he was born with red hair or blue eyes, as there is no moral failure involved. God will not hold a person responsible or punish him for such things although in this world, men may discriminate against him because of his colour or appearance.

The Scriptures clearly teaches the reality of man's capacity to make moral choices, for example, when Moses exhorted the Israelites to choose life rather than death:

Deuteronomy 30:19

19 "I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. So choose life in order that you may live, you and your descendants

The Scriptures again and again exhorts us to repent and believe and to obey God's commandments rather than harden our hearts, rebel against God and disobey Him. We can say the basic biblical message and exhortation is that we exercise our moral choice in the right direction – choose good and turn away from evil, submit to God and walk in His ways and resist the evil one and reject his temptations. We can choose to do otherwise and sadly, many do.

Importance of Correct Understanding on the Issue of Choice

It is helpful to understand that there is a framework within which this capacity to choose is exercised. There are certain limitations, for example, we cannot say, "I choose to fly" because we do not have the capacity to fly. Neither can we choose the context in which we are born, including country of birth, parents and family members, race, constitutional make-up and the context of the fallen world. Within certain limitations like how God has created man and some aspects of our framework which are fixed, we can make genuine moral choices.

The reality of the existence of choice is clearly present and very important to bear in mind but this is not something that has been given due recognition at all times and there are those who deny it altogether. We should be mindful of this area because failure to understand and give due recognition to the capacity of man to make genuine moral choices and the implications that follow, has resulted in various problems.

Many philosophers of this world have found the freedom of choice that man has puzzling. This is partly because of their whole approach to life and how they view total reality. It is not feasible to have an accurate and wholesome understanding of the issue of choice without the recognition of the existence of God and how He has created man as a moral being.

Those who do not believe in God would have a big problem in trying to understand the issue of choice. According to their frame of mind, they would tend to think in this way: we are born into the world with certain constitutions and the way we behave would be the result of the interaction between our constitution and the environment. Our conduct is controlled by our constitution at birth and the influences we are subjected to. When life is viewed along this line, how can there be freedom of choice? How can we choose other than what we have chosen? If one is born with a certain constitution and goes through certain experiences and influences, then the person could not help but respond and act in the way he does. Whatever choices we make, there would be reasons for them and if these reasons are present, how could we have chosen otherwise?

Added to the cause of their bewilderment is the recognition within their consciousness that they are able to choose other than what they have chosen. For example, when a person is hungry and he is offered some food, he can still choose to

eat the food or to reject it. But according to that line of thinking, the person would surely eat the food since he is hungry and the food is appealing to him. So how is it that he can still choose to eat or not to eat the food?

Those who recognise that man is capable of choice are puzzled as to how this is possible. There are those who conclude that the sense of freedom to choose is in reality an illusion.

Unwholesome understanding of the issue of choice can have consequences on major areas of life, for example, in regard to the administration of criminal justice, how we bring up children, and in our understanding of the actions of people.

Administration of Justice

On this area of administration of criminal justice, that is, how the laws of the country are administered and the theories of punishment, there has been a lot of debate as to how we should approach the issue of punishment. Punishment basically has to do with penalty and with inflicting pain on the wrongdoer for the wrong that he has done that is detrimental to society.

The basic approach in relation to the severity of the punishment ought to be based on the principle of *retribution*, that is, the amount of punishment to be meted out to the wrongdoer would commensurate with the seriousness of the crime. Some things are very hard to measure, especially in today's context. For instance, when one hits another causing the victim to lose an eye, we do not punish the offender by taking out one of his eyes. The court will try to weigh the seriousness of the crime under the circumstances and mete out the punishment in terms of the number of years of imprisonment or the amount of fine or number of strokes of the cane or a combination of these.

Another approach adopted is called *deterrence*. This means that the punishment meted out is with the motive of deterring others from committing similar offences. The understanding of how important it is to deter people from such anti-social acts would have a bearing on the severity of the punishment.

Another approach is known as *reformation*, which is to change the way of thinking and the way of life of the offender. The idea of reforming the offender may appear to be very attractive, its aim being to help the offender to become a better person rather than merely punishing him on the basis of retribution and deterrence. However, some supporters of the theory of reformation may fail to recognise or may give insufficient consideration to human choice and accountability. They hold the view that crimes are committed because of the constitution of the offender and the environment he is in, that is, the offender cannot help committing the crime. They look at the criminal with pity and believe that what he needs is not punishment but treatment; it is as if the criminal has an illness that requires treatment.

The major problem with such an approach is a failure to recognise the human responsibility behind the criminal act, that is, the reality of choice that the person has and the wickedness in the wrongdoing. There is failure to recognise that in spite of the constitution of a person and his environment and circumstances, the person still has the freedom of choice. He can still exercise his choice for which he can be held accountable though his constitution and surrounding circumstances and other relevant factors present may be mitigating factors in determining the gravity of the offence and severity of punishment he deserves. The failure to recognise human choice and human responsibility tends to obliterate the ugliness of a crime. The offence may also be regarded merely as conduct which society just happens to be intolerant of.

If we take the approach that one should not punish the wrongdoer but "treat" him, this may give rise to the problem of the nature or the period of "treatment". A person may have committed the offence of spitting or littering, which is only a minor offence but he may have a very bad and strong habit in these areas. If punishment is meted out from the point of view of "treatment" that is necessary to cure the person of this chronic habit, then a long period of "treatment" will be required which may not commensurate at all with the severity of the offence.

There are frightening reports of regimes which abuse their power and wrongfully punish dissidents whose actions they are not prepared to tolerate by subjecting them to terrible "psychiatric" and other forms of "medical treatment" so that they will cease from their "anti-social" behaviour. It may be described in language that sounds positive or acceptable – to "reform" the person so that he can become a "useful" citizen, but in reality it is terrible and wrongful punishment to nullify the perceived threat and to deter others.

On the other hand, for serious offences like that of causing grievous injury to someone or killing someone because the offender feels that the person has wronged him and he bears a grudge against him, one may conclude that a brief imprisonment or a brief treatment period is sufficient because in the particular instance, the offender has nothing to be treated. He had only injured or killed the particular victim because of a special set of circumstances, which is not likely to be repeated and so it is not likely that he would repeat the offence against another person.

If we do not appreciate the aspect of human responsibility and the wickedness of the wrongful act or the gravity of the offence, but merely look at it from the angle of treatment or reformation, it would give rise to the problem of unjust punishment.

A wholesome approach to the issue of punishment for wrongful or criminal acts would be on the basis of how much punishment the person deserves. It would be proper to help someone who is sick or insane by rendering treatment, but when it comes to crimes, punishment has to be based on desert. It is important to make a distinction between punishment for wrongdoing and treatment for an illness.

In order to maintain law and order, society may see the need to pass deterrent sentences because of the increased rate of crime. But in such a context, the issue of justice and desert must still be a very prominent feature in the severity of punishment to be meted out. The gravity of the sentence must commensurate with the nature and gravity of the offence.

In *carrying out the sentence*, there is a proper place to consider reformation, that is, to help the person to turn around so that he can become a more useful citizen. But *in sentencing a criminal*, we should not be primarily thinking of reformation and forget about human responsibility, the nature and gravity of the crime, and the wickedness behind that act.

Bringing Up Children

In the area of bringing up children or seeking to help students or other people, it is very important to pay attention to the moral meaning of their actions and their moral and spiritual development, rather than merely looking at the external acts or their habits. Is the person deliberately choosing to do something with the knowledge that it is not good? Sometimes the action annoys us, but the intention of the person is positive.

As we understand how God looks at us and that what is of primary importance is our moral choice, we should then seek to inculcate in children not mere conformity to certain external actions, but to help them to choose with good motives and to teach them to pay attention to the moral aspects of their conduct.

Understanding the Actions of Others

In the way we view, understand and appreciate people, we should not assess a person by his outward acts or conduct towards us. For example, when someone buys us presents or says pleasant words to us, we should try to understand the moral meaning behind and beyond the external act, whether he or she is sincere and trying to encourage us or trying to flatter us, which could bring about our downfall. It is easy to be deceived because we like to hear pleasant words being uttered and are happy to be at the receiving end of pleasing external acts.

On the other hand, another may say and do things that disturb and upset us but he has done so out of genuine concern for our well-being. We need to be discerning in our understanding of people so that we can respond appropriately to each one.

How We Choose in Moral Areas

How we choose and what we choose is extremely important especially in moral areas. Although we also exercise choices in amoral areas, for example, our colour preferences, such areas are relatively unimportant in the sight of God. Ultimately,

God will judge us in the moral dimension, whether the motives of our hearts are good or evil, self-centred or God-centred.

We exercise our choice every day and all the time. God gives us this capacity to choose and we must exercise it well. We cannot say, "I give up my capacity to choose. I do not want to choose." If we do not prayerfully and carefully seek to exercise this ability to choose, the evil one and the powers of darkness will try their best to "choose" for us. I say "choose" because they cannot literally choose for us but they can try to influence us. If we are passive in the exercise of our choice, they will try to manipulate us and slowly they will begin to "choose" for us by planting all kinds of thoughts or by swaying our emotions.

We must guard this capacity to choose very carefully as it is important in the eyes of God and He will hold us accountable. Therefore we have to learn to choose wisely, according to the truth we have come to understand. It is important that we have sound knowledge and understanding of the truth so that we can make good choices.

God will hold us accountable if we deviate from the truth and fail to choose according to the truth we know. Therefore a careful and prayerful exercise of choice is important. It must not be on the basis of emotion, impulse of the moment, prejudice, urges in certain directions or natural inclinations, which the forces of darkness can easily manipulate and take advantage of.

When Eve was tempted, not only were her emotions affected but her other faculties as well. She was tempted in the areas of the mind ("desirable to make one wise"), the appetites ("the tree was good for food"), and the emotions ("a delight to the eyes"). These areas can be easily affected and thus cannot be the bases for us to exercise our choice.

The evil one may also tempt us to do things on impulse. For instance, we see how the evil one tempted the Lord Jesus to throw Himself down from the pinnacle of the temple. If we are not careful, we may be led to do things on impulse, leading to disastrous consequences. Instead we should carefully consider how we choose and act, especially actions that have significant consequences.

The Temptation of the Lord Jesus: Choosing and Acting on Basis of Truth and God's Revelation

It is helpful to look at the way the Lord Jesus Christ countered the attacks of the evil one. The brief replies of the Lord Jesus recorded for us in the Scriptures can help us answer the following questions:

- a. What would be a responsible approach to choosing and decision-making?
- b. How do we counter the attacks of the evil one when he tempts us to choose wrongly?

In the first temptation, the answer of the Lord Jesus to the evil one was: "Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God." It means that we should choose or act on the basis of truth and on the principles of God's revelation. We should choose on the basis of "every word that proceeds out of the mouth of God." We must not act on the basis of inclinations or just because our emotions are stirred or there is an impulse in that direction.

In the third temptation, the Lord Jesus replied to the evil one: "You shall worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only." From here, we see that another related basis of our choices and actions ought to be commitment to God and worship of Him. In every action that we take, we have to test it to ensure that we are not acting merely because of natural inclinations or because we feel ourselves being pulled in that direction. No, we have to act prayerfully and carefully, on the basis of truth, according to the revelation in the Scriptures, as part of our expression of worship of God and our commitment to Him.

I now want to make two important observations on the issue of choice. The first concerns the consequences of our choices and the other, our ability to choose well.

The Choices We Make Affect Our Moral, Spiritual Development and Being

Every choice that we make is important and has an impact upon our lives. Whether it is made in obedience or disobedience to God, it will affect our very being and our moral and spiritual development. If we choose to obey God, we will move in the direction of light and goodness; if we choose to disobey God, we will move in the direction of darkness and evil.

A disobedient act does not stop at the act itself; it also has a negative effect on our being; likewise, an obedient act will have a positive effect on our being. The positive development of our being, that we may be conformed to the image of His Son, is of primary importance to God and the fulfilment of His purposes. That is why the apostle James tells us to "consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials" (James 1: 2). God's intention in allowing us to go through trials is that we may be "perfect and complete, lacking in nothing" (v. 4). We need not be discouraged when we go through trials because through trials, we can be perfected as we obey the Lord. We are being perfected in every decision we make that is in obedience to God.

How are we being conformed to the image of God? How does it take place? Yes, it is through God's grace and the Holy Spirit working in our lives - but it also requires our positive response and the choices that we make in co-operation with God. Step by step, as we co-operate with God, the Spirit of God is moulding us and transforming us and we will be more and more conformed to the image of the Lord.

Although not every act has the same degree of importance and gravity, every moral response matters. Thus, we should not be careless but try to ensure that in every moral choice that we make, we do it in obedience to God, on the basis of truth and as part of our worship of Him. We cannot be careless for there are many negative influences that will come our way. Satan and the powers of darkness are always waiting to manipulate our choices in the direction of evil as they seek to build their own kingdom of darkness.

Our Ability to Choose Wisely

Our ability to cope, choose and act wisely in any given situation is related to our whole approach to life and how we have lived. We know that it is important to choose wisely, but realise that it is not something that we can simply do at the point of the decision. How we have been living, growing, channelling our energy and nurturing our spiritual health, and whether we have been walking in the Spirit or feeding the flesh, would have a significant bearing on how well we will cope and choose at any given moment of time and in any given situation.

For instance, we may want to choose to honour and obey God at a particular moment, but find it extremely difficult to do so. This may be due to various factors:

a. *We lack spiritual understanding.* We may not know what to do because we have not been growing in spiritual understanding, having neglected the means available to us to grow in knowledge. Or when deception comes, we may not be able to discern it. Thus, even though we want to honour the Lord, we find ourselves being deceived.

b. *We lack spiritual strength.* The spiritual strength that we have is very much related to the whole way we have been living our lives and not just at that moment in time. So, even though we desire to honour the Lord, we may not have the spiritual strength to do so because we have not been nurturing our spiritual health with absorption of spiritual food and exercising our spirit in obedience to God.

c. *Strong fleshly desires.* If we have been feeding the flesh instead of exercising our spirit in obedience to God, then the desires of the flesh can become very strong and compelling. Even though at a given moment of time we may want to honour the Lord and obey Him, we may find it extremely difficult to do so as the desires of the flesh can become almost like a compulsion, pulling us in the direction of fleshly indulgence.

The principle reflected in Proverbs 1 is relevant to what we are considering:

Proverbs 1:20-33

20 Wisdom shouts in the street, She lifts her voice in the square;
21 At the head of the noisy streets she cries out; At the entrance of the gates
in the city she utters her sayings:
22 "How long, O naive ones, will you love being simple-minded? And scoffers
delight themselves in scoffing And fools hate knowledge?
23 "Turn to my reproof, Behold, I will pour out my spirit on you; I will make
my words known to you.
24 "Because I called and you refused, I stretched out my hand and no one
paid attention;
25 And you neglected all my counsel And did not want my reproof;
26 I will also laugh at your calamity; I will mock when your dread comes,
27 When your dread comes like a storm And your calamity comes like a
whirlwind, When distress and anguish come upon you.
28 "Then they will call on me, but I will not answer; They will seek me
diligently but they will not find me,
29 Because they hated knowledge And did not choose the fear of the Lord.
30 "They would not accept my counsel, They spurned all my reproof."
31 "So they shall eat of the fruit of their own way
And be satiated with their own devices.
32 "For the waywardness of the naive will kill them,
And the complacency of fools will destroy them.
33 "But he who listens to me shall live securely
And will be at ease from the dread of evil."

Wisdom is personified in Proverbs 1:20-33 and she is communicating the point that if we have been living in a foolish manner, neglecting knowledge and counsel, when the time of dread, calamity, distress and anguish come upon us and we need wisdom, we may not be able to have it although we call for it – "they shall eat the fruit of their own way and be satiated with their own devices" (v.31).

In contrast, verse 33 tells us, "But he who listens to me shall live securely, and shall be at ease from the dread of evil." If we respond positively to the truth, we will continue to grow and live securely.

How we have been living has a cumulative effect upon our lives. It affects us in how we fare and what we do at any moment of time. Every choice that we make affects our being and our ability to choose well in the future.

Therefore, it is important to bear in mind that every choice that we make counts, and every choice affects our being and our development. And our whole direction of life and how we have been growing will in turn affect our ability to cope and to exercise choices at any moment of time.

Concluding Remarks

Let us therefore be wise. As Paul encourages us in Ephesians 4, let us grow unto maturity so that we will not be easily tossed about. We will be tossed to and fro if we are not equipped to go through well the different situations of life. In the context of Ephesians 4, Paul is referring to the growth of the body. That is the framework in which God desires us to exercise our choices wisely. We need one another. As we encourage and help one another to grow and to exercise our choices wisely, we will be built up in love unto maturity. We will then not be easily tossed to and fro in any given situation of life.

Let us reflect on our lives. What kind of choices do we make? Are we prayerfully and carefully exercising our choices day by day? Let us come before the Lord and ask Him to guide and strengthen us so that we will make choices that are in line with the truth.

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