

### **“God Is Closer Than You Think—The Choice”**

True story. A young couple bought a very old home a few years ago and they started fixing it up. The husband was going through the attic during one of those fix-up days and found an old paper bag along with lots of other old things. It wasn't something they had put there. Of course he decided to look inside and there was money in the bag. In fact, it turned out to be thousands and thousands of dollars!

They looked at the dates on the bills and they were all from many decades ago—that bag had been up there for ages. There was no way to track who put it there first—if it was a miser's savings or left over from some bank heist.

The couple of course wondered if they had to give the money to the people they bought the house from or if it was theirs to keep. They asked a lawyer and were told that it was theirs to keep. When they bought the house the contents came with it.

Here's the strange thing ... somebody put a treasure in the attic and then forgot it was there! Just think about all the other owners between then and now, living in that house for years. Imagine the flood of financial obligations and crises that came up over those years: bills, mortgage payments, taxes, debt. Of all the families that had lived in that house over the decades, there had to have been some sleepless nights and anxious moments in that house about financial concerns. And the whole time there was a treasure in the house!

Here's the point: There was a huge gap between the riches available to those people ... and the reality that they lived in. They never made the effort to go to the attic. They never saw the treasure. The reality for many people today is that there is a gap between what they are experiencing in their relationship with God and what they know they could be experiencing. It is as though they're living and walking around in the house **knowing** that there is treasure in the attic—but it's a treasure that they have rarely, if ever, experienced. They know that there's something more, but haven't been willing to visit the attic. The choice is theirs, but they haven't *made* the choice to be with God.

Last week we talked about God's desire from the beginning of creation to be *with* us—and all the different ways he has expressed that. But even with all his desire and effort, he still leaves it up to you and me to make the choice to be with him. And remember, God *is* closer than you think. Today we're going to talk about *our* choice ... to go to the attic ... to move toward God. And we're going to consider what it means to pursue a relationship with him. [STUDY GUIDE REMINDER]

This is important: When we make the choice to be *with* God, it doesn't mean that we have to go and sit on a mountain and learn how to chant; or eat just one meal a week; or read our Bibles and pray twenty-three hours a day ... we can learn to be with Jesus through every part of every **ordinary** day. A disciple is someone who is trying intentionally to make each day, each ordinary day, a chance to be with Jesus, to learn from Jesus ... To become like Jesus.

As we look at what it means to make the choice to be *with* Jesus every day, I'm going to cover four aspects of life where we can make the choice to be with God.

Let's start with work. [SLIDE: “**How do I choose to be with Jesus at work?**”] How do you *work* with Jesus? Did you know that the single largest block of waking time in most of our lives is spent working? And in fact, how we work—and the way we approach our work—can actually be a life-or-death decision for us.

There was a survey done that found that outside of your genetics, the single most important predictor of how long you will live is *your work satisfaction!* Now that you know that, are some of you wondering if you're going to die at any moment?! Since work is such an important part of our lives, I think it's important that we talk about what work is from a biblical perspective.

You see, over the last few centuries, mostly because of the Industrial Revolution, we've come to equate *work* with having a *job* which in turn produces our *paycheck*. The result is that we have a distorted understanding about who “works” and “does not work.” In fact, a lot of people—those who are retired, or stay-at-home parents, or the unemployed—are thought of as not working because they're not getting a paycheck.

Do you remember in school when you were told, “There's no such thing as a stupid question?” Oh yes there is ... Go ask a stay-at-home mom with young children: “Do you work?” *THAT'S* a stupid question! So we have to reclaim the biblical definition of work because it includes a lot more than our culture has defined—so

much more than just collecting a paycheck. The biblical perspective is that work is the creation of value as I serve God, as I care for his creation, and as I try to benefit the lives of other people.

Work includes our paid employment. And work also includes doing household chores. It includes study and schoolwork. It includes our volunteer service at church or in the community. Here's a simple test you can take right now to see if you're doing your work with a biblical perspective. Ask yourself this question: **[SLIDE...]** **"If tomorrow, Jesus were to show up while I'm working, would things go any differently?"**

There's a fundamental statement about work in the Bible that should help us understand work, **[SLIDE...]** **"Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men....It is the Lord Christ you are serving" (Colossians 3:23–24).**

Here's a true story—I'm not making this up: A husband was at home on the couch reading the newspaper. His wife, who was eight months pregnant, was in the kitchen—on her hands and knees—washing the kitchen floor. His mother-in-law walks in and says: "How can you let my daughter do this?" He looks over the top of his newspaper and says, "I tried to help. I told her if she'd tie a rag around her middle, she'd get done twice as fast." No one ever saw that man again!

Dallas Willard writes this about work: **[SLIDE...]** **We "routinely sacrifice our comfort and pleasure for the quality of our work, whether it be ax handles, tacos, or the development of a student we're teaching ... We do the job well because that is what Jesus would like, and we admire and love him. It is what he would do."** Dallas Willard

Here's a few more questions to ask yourself: **[SLIDE...]** **Am I making an idol of my work? Do I sacrifice time and energy that ought to go to my family, or friendships, or rest, or to prayer? How do I treat my coworkers? If I'm in a position of authority, do I treat those who report to me as Jesus would? Am I truthful and fair? Do I work for their growth and development? Do I regularly ask God for help, wisdom, and guidance in my work? Am I truly honest in my work? Am I careful with expense reports? Do I reimburse the company for personal use of phone or equipment? Is my work in line with my sense of how God has gifted and called me?** If not, what steps can I take to move in the right direction? How can I continue to serve with diligence in the meantime?

Whatever activity may constitute work, how we choose to do it reflects our choice to be *with* God or to *move away* from God. It's important to remember that work is one of best learning opportunities most of us have to discover truth about ourselves. It is an intensive environment that God uses to test and shape us to become more like Jesus.

So tomorrow when you go to your work, take a moment before you start and say: *"Here's my chance to learn from Jesus how to live in his kingdom."* We can choose to be with Jesus at work, and it can make all the difference in the work we do.

Now let's turn the corner and talk about the opposite of work. Another area where we can make the choice to be with Jesus is in our recreational activities and leisure time. **[SLIDE: "How do I choose to be with Jesus in recreation and leisure?"]**. God did not make you to work all the time. This may come as a shock to some of the "type A's" here, but part of God's will for you is to rest, relax, create, play, and be renewed.

Each moment of free time that you have equals a chance to be with him. But we need to be intentional, because the default mode of how we use our leisure time often goes toward what one sociologist calls an eight-hundred-pound gorilla of leisure: the television. Time researchers John Robinson and Geoffrey Godbey found that television took almost 40 percent of American's free time in 1995—and that was an increase of a third from thirty years earlier!

Robert Putnam, in his book *Bowling Alone*, writes, **[SLIDE...]** **"Dependence on television for entertainment is not merely a significant predictor of loss of community; it is the *single most consistent predictor I have discovered.*"** What does that mean? It means that nothing—not low education, not full-time work, not long commutes, not poverty or financial distress—is more closely connected with loss of community and relational disconnection than depending on TV for entertainment. People who rely on TV for entertainment are least likely to volunteer, least likely to stay in touch with friends, least likely to attend church—and most likely to give another driver the finger.

So how can you reclaim your recreational and leisure time—and choose to be with Jesus instead of Hollywood? Limit how much you watch. Decide on a limit and stick to it. Limit the number of TVs in your house. Here's a shocking factoid: In 1970—6 percent of all sixth graders had TVs in their bedrooms. But by 1999—77 percent of sixth graders had their own bedroom TV! How about choosing to go for a day/weekend/week without TV? Take it even further and go on a “media fast.”

As you are reclaiming the time lost to TV, ask yourself: “What are some of the activities that God uses to breathe life into me? What do I engage in that produces gratitude, joy, and renewal?” Some people love to get out into nature—either riding a motorcycle, hiking, or biking. Others enjoy cooking—so for them reading cookbooks and creating new dishes is their way of feeling refreshed and renewed. Maybe your deal is eating—you need to find someone whose deal is cooking and strike up a spiritual friendship!

Tomorrow you'll probably have some free time. Before you pick up the remote control, stop ... and say, “Here's my chance—to be with Jesus, learn how to become like him.”

A third area where we can make the choice to be with Jesus is through our lifestyle choices. **[SLIDE: “How do I choose to be with Jesus in my lifestyle choices?”]** We all make choices about the way we'll spend our time. The way we spend our money. What our pace of life will be. How much debt we'll live in. How many commitments we'll make. How much pressure we'll be under. All these have an enormous impact on whether we're able to get closer to God, or if we are moving farther away.

The apostle Paul basically said, “Don't let the world squeeze you into its mold” (Romans 12:2, paraphrase). But what happens is that the world says: “Move faster!”—and so we do! But when we move faster it cuts us off from prayer. We become more anxious and increasingly angry ... and eventually unable to love.

Listen, if Satan can't make you defy God outright, he'll settle for just making you real busy. John Ortberg says that hurry is the great enemy of spiritual life in our day. His phrase is that you must and I must ruthlessly eliminate hurry from our lives.

The question is: What's the pace of life where you can live and still be intimately connected to God? What's the pace of life where you'll be able to effectively love people and live with joy?

Another lifestyle choice has to do with our stuff. Our world says: “Accumulate more.” We live in a consumer culture: Holidays, that used to be for rest and worship, are now just excuses to shop and consume. Malls have replaced churches and town squares as gathering places. And the rise in consumerism has led to an increase in clutter in our lives. One of the ways that we can choose to be with God is to clear out the clutter so that we are freer to focus on him. Go on a forty-day de-cluttering campaign in your home. Clean out your closets and donate excess stuff to charity.

Just beware, as you get rid of stuff you might need an accountability partner, a trusted friend who will keep you from restuffing. Restuffing happens after you've cleaned out all your closets, drawers, storage sheds you feel like now you need to get new stuff! Also beware of stuff co-addicts who may see your closet-cleaning as a chance to acquire stuff for themselves from your stuff supply.

Obviously that doesn't mean it's wrong to shop. It's fine to love beauty and enjoy excellence and fine design—those are good things. The point is, we each need to come to the place where we can say: “I will need God's help to make purchasing decisions wisely.”

Carry that wisdom principle into other areas of life. A job change. Relocation. A major purchase. Any time you make a major life decision, you need to ask the question: “How will this impact my ability to follow Christ—as a worker, dad, friend, husband, and so on.” If you are going to make the choice to be with Jesus through your lifestyle choices, saying yes to Jesus means you are going to have to say no to some other things. What do you need to say no to?

—Maybe you say no to debt. Maybe you'll want to take the Crown financial management course at church. Start to make the move from financial pressure to generosity.

—Maybe you say no to some time commitments. There could be an activity you or the kids are involved in—and it's not a bad thing in itself, but it's contributing to an overall pace of life for you or your family that is not healthy.

—Maybe it's a major purchase that could put you under financial pressure that would not be healthy.

—Maybe it's a need to honor the Sabbath. Be sure to have times of rest or vacation with people you love that will be renewing to you and remind you of God's goodness. Bring a healthy rhythm to your life's pace and balance with your stuff. Make the choice to be with Jesus in your lifestyle choices.

The fourth area where we can make the choice to be with Jesus is in our relationships. **[SLIDE: "How do I choose to be with Jesus in my relationships?"]** Have you ever considered that when you are with other people, you are making the choice to either be with Jesus in those relationships or to exclude him? He's there, are you making the choice to be with him?

*One facet of choosing to be with Jesus in our relationships is through our friendships.* Research is showing that friendships are being marginalized on a large scale in our culture. They're finding that the busier we get the more we say, "Friendship is one thing I can give up in my busy life." Even though the TV comedy *Friends* was a hit, the reality is that friendships are becoming less common. When friendships are formed, they are more short-lived and more superficial.

Listen, a friendless life is not God's plan for human life! When we make a choice to live with marginalized friendships—or no friendships—we are choosing to be less "with" Jesus—because he reveals himself to us through the community of friendship. The Bible says, **[SLIDE...]** **"A friend loves at all times, and a brother is born for adversity" (Proverbs 17:17).** Friendship is necessary for spiritual growth. In the book of Proverbs it says: **[SLIDE...]** **"As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another" (Proverbs 27:17).** Are you devoting enough time, attention, and energy to cultivating deep spiritual friendships?

*Another kind of relationship where we not only make the choice to be with Jesus, but cling to him is when we have to deal with difficult people.*

You may not believe this, but you need difficult people in your life! Jesus was very emphatic about this. He said (and I paraphrase), "Love your enemies—those who are difficult for you to like. If you love only those who love you back—where's the goodness in that? Even the mafia does that much. And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Drug dealers do the same thing" (Matthew 5:44-48).

The ability to love difficult people is like a litmus test of spiritual growth. This means you need difficult people in your life. It's absolutely necessary for your development. Through those relationships you are drawn more closely to Christ because your new intention is to treat these people the way Jesus would, and you can't do that apart from him. If you've got some difficult people in your life—be glad. If you don't—we have a list here at the church. We can assign you some.

I want you to think of someone who is difficult for you to love: Maybe someone at work. Maybe someone in your family. Maybe an ex-spouse. Maybe it's me! Maybe it varies—a relationship that sometimes goes smoothly, sometimes doesn't. Every time you have an encounter with someone who's difficult for you to love, remember: Here's my chance to learn from Jesus how to live in his kingdom. Here's my chance to be with Jesus in the stuff of everyday life.

Every day, woven into the fabric of our activities and relationships, are choices to be with Jesus or to attempt life on our own. Every day we face choices to go into the attic where the treasure is, or to go through that day missing the richness of life found in the choice to be with Jesus.

Moses once prayed, **[SLIDE...]** **"Teach us to number our days aright, so that we may gain a heart of wisdom" (Psalm 90:12).** I pray that God would help us to wake up every morning and say, "Here's my opportunity... To be with Jesus, To learn from Jesus, How to become like Jesus. And treasure this day." And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Prayer...

Before you go, listen to this song. It's called, "I Will Choose Christ."

*I thank Rev. John Ortberg, Sr. Pastor of Menlo Park Presbyterian Church, for his resources for this message.*