

CHOOSE JESUS

Luke 13:23-30

Choices—we all have to make them. But in our world of variety that can be difficult to do. One writer recently noticed that about pop-dispenser machine at restaurants:

I recently observed this phenomenon at several restaurants that have sophisticated soda-dispensing machines. These soda fountains give customers the ability to choose and mix over 100 drink flavors using a touchscreen and button interface. The idea might sound cool, but the reality is not so impressive.

Filling up a cup with soda is an activity that usually takes less than 10 seconds. With these fancy machines, some people need more than a minute to complete this simple task. New customers struggle to figure out an unfamiliar touch interface consisting of multiple menu levels. And some end up taking an excessive amount of time experimenting with flavors: they decide on a flavor, navigate to it, dispense the chosen mix, take a sip, pour out, and try again. All this extra work and decision-making results in long lines and grumpy customers. Here are some comments from them:

“This machine is a momentum killer, only serves one person at a time including ice. The buttons are vague. I observed one machine in use at a very busy 7-11 last summer and the line was out the door waiting for one person at a time [to] navigate this frustrating machine. Customers were giving up and leaving...Too much tech for a simple need.” –

“I've found that the machines have a few natural enemies...mainly families with children and the elderly. Both [of] which immediately drag the whole drink process to a halt while a line builds up behind them.”

“I just want a soda; I don't want to program the soda fountain. I am a programmer by trade, and want to get away from the office at lunch. I just want a soda, that's it, not a job, and personally, these machines are too much work.”

Choices are what students have to face at Iowa State. Twenty years ago the ISU Catalogue was 397 pages long. Now it is over 1300! Most of both catalogues contain course descriptions. It is not that the descriptions have gotten longer, but the sheer number of courses has increased. Yes, Iowa State grew in numbers during that time, but there are still a lot more majors and courses—a lot more choices. When became ISU became a university in 1959, it had five colleges—three more have been added since. There are also a lot more clubs and activities to choose from. And like so many other people students have many choices on the internet—games to play and You-tube videos to watch.

Choices also affect adults in the working world. I know an architect who began working before the personal computer was made available. He said the computer does allow much work to be done more quickly, but it adds so many more choices that in the long run it does not save any time.

In this world of choices Jesus confronts us with one: “Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to.” Jesus said this in response to the disciples asking, “Lord, will only a few people going to be saved?” It can make it sound like only a few people will make the right choice to follow Jesus. So the conclusion is that only the smart and clever people, like those who raise the curve when the professors grade tests, will be saved. Will we among them? Will we be smart enough to make the right choice?

The “gate” Jesus speaks about is narrow, not because God’s love is limited, but because it is not obvious to people who depend on themselves or others to make choices for them. It is like when you run into a line of traffic in one lane while the other is moving. The obvious move is to go into that fast lane. But down the road you find that it is “fast” because it is blocked. What was obvious before is not later on. Choosing to follow Jesus is not so obvious. After all He is the One who says strange things like, “Indeed there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last.” We are like cats that have climbed up too high in the tree. We don’t want to jump into the hands of a rescuer. We want to cling to what we can hold on to, not to Jesus. It is not an easy choice for us.

And following Jesus is not a “simple” choice, not when He doesn’t give us the easy answers and easier life that can appeal to us. Humans have limited capacities for processing information and often choose the path of least effort, even though an alternative path would result in better outcomes. To avoid overload and fatigue, we can go with what just seems easy. That is why so many in the world have turned to Islam. You don’t have to do much thinking or choosing—just do what you are told to do.

The other problem is that if Jesus is such a good choice that can make it harder for us to choose Him. When people are asked to decide between something like an iPod and a bag of pretzels, they don’t feel particularly anxious: the choice is clear and life is good. When both choices are low in value, the emotions are similarly clear-cut. No one is particularly happy, but neither are they anxious. But when multiple highly positive options are available—a digital camera and a camcorder, say—anxiety skyrockets. The choices between those objects that they valued most highly are both the most positive and the most anxiety-filled. The more choices they have, the more anxious they feel. As one researcher has said “When you have more good choices, you don’t feel better. You just feel more anxious.”

This is like the story of Buridan’s ass: a pretend donkey that finds itself standing between two equally appealing stacks of hay. Unable to decide which to consume, it starves to death.

So with all the choices we face, and many of them that seem so good, and with a temptation to go with an easy choice, will we choose the narrow door of Jesus?

The key is to see how Jesus' answer of the narrow gate answers what the disciples said about "a few" being saved. Jesus told those same disciples that people will come from east and west, from far away, to be seated with God in heaven. He also told them, The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and give His life for "the many." Revelation describes the saved as a great crowd that cannot be numbered. The "few" are not "few" because of their number, but because of how they will be saved. It is not about their choice or effort. As sinful humans we expect to be saved by what we do. But the door is narrow because it depends not on us, but on Christ Himself. "Indeed there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last." Jesus has it all backwards because he is talking not about effort or being good, but about God's grace.

God chose you in Christ Jesus. For many of you, He placed you in a home with Christian parents who brought you to be baptized into Christ. For others you met a good friend or even a spouse who God used to bring Himself into Your life. And now that He has chosen you, He gives you the opportunity to choose Him.

Sermon delivered by Pastor Mark T. Heilman
August 25, 2019
Memorial Lutheran Church and Student Center
Ames, Iowa 50014