

CHOOSE YOUR LEADER CAREFULLY

GALATIANS 5:1, 13-15

JUNE 29, 1986

Years ago a boy grew up in Cleveland in a home which he later described as "materially poor but spiritually rich." One day a famous athlete, Charlie Paddock, came to school to speak to the students. At that time, Paddock was considered the "fastest human being alive." He told the children, "Listen What do you want to be? You name it and then believe that God will help you be it." The young boy decided that he wanted to be the fastest human being alive, just like Charlie Paddock. The boy went to the track coach and told him of his dream. The coach told him, "It's great to have a dream, but to attain your dream you must build a ladder to it. The first rung is determination. The second rung is dedication. The third rung is discipline. And the fourth rung is attitude." The boy took the example and advice of his leaders seriously and eventually won four gold medals in the Berlin Olympics. Jesse Owens broke the 100 meter dash record, the 200 meter record, and his broad jump record lasted for 24 years.

Jesse Owens decided what he wanted in life and then chose his leader carefully. His role model helped him to attain his goal. When I was a child, a popular game was "Follow the Leader." We lined up single-file behind the leader and followed her/him through bushes, under desks, hopping, skipping or crawling in imitation of the leader. To attain your goal, be clear about the goal, and then choose a leader to follow and emulate who will help you reach your goal.

Choose your route carefully. Some folks choose a route that does not lead to their desired destination. It is quite frustrating to look at a map and follow the roads that lead to Sacramento, when you really wanted to go to Carmel. Some folks feel quite disappointed, discouraged, bitter and angry, accusing life of being unfair, when they fail to reach their goals. Perhaps they have been following the wrong roads, or following the wrong leader. Choose your leader carefully. Don't be upset when you plant a lemon tree, fertilize it, water it, and discover that it produces lemons and not oranges. In other words, you usually get what you ask for.

In the epistle lesson this morning, Paul writes about "doing what you would." (Galatians 5:17) The Jerusalem Bible translates the phrase as, "carry out your good intentions." To carry out your good intentions is a matter of choosing your leader, says Paul. Paul, as usual in his letters, is addressing a problem in the church. Evidently, in the Galatian church, there were some who were saying that because they were freed by Christ from the Jewish law, they could do anything they pleased. Paul responded by saying that Christ frees you from the law; but, be careful that you are not enslaved by something or someone worse. We all need leaders. We all need goals. We all need to choose the means and the methods that will carry out our good intentions.

In this passage Paul discusses two leaders, leaders that are diametrically opposed to one another, leaders that are so influential, so overpowering in dealing with basic attitudes and motivations, that we find ourselves following one or the other and sometimes both. In your life would you like to experience love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control? Is it your good intention to be kinder to your

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spouse, children, parents? Is it your good intention to be trustworthy so that you can have friends who treat you with respect, and a job where you are respected and trusted? Is it your good intention to attain joy, a deep joy that endures and sustains you even when the road gets rough? Is it your good intention to have self-control, self-discipline, so that you are in control, and not at the mercy and whim of other people or your own drives? If so, then choose your leader carefully, so that you may carry out your good intentions.

Paul is emphatic. When Jesus Christ is your leader, when you are guided, inspired and empowered by the Holy Spirit, then you will experience the fruits of the Spirit. When you cultivate lemons, you will grow lemons. When you cultivate the Spirit, you will experience love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, trustfulness, gentleness and self-control. Therefore, follow Jesus and let yourself be directed by the Spirit.

Now, the other leader Paul mentions that is likewise influential and overpowering is the opposite of the Spirit. Most of us experience a battle between the two, a battle between the Spirit and "sarx." The Greek word "sarx" has been translated into English by a variety of different phrases. The King James version of the Bible translated "sarx" as "lust of the flesh." "Lust of the flesh" has a sexual connotation to our modern ears. The original meaning included sexual behavior, but was not limited to sex, as "lust of the flesh" suggests. The Revised Standard Version, which you heard read this morning, translates "sarx" as "desires of the flesh", which is also sexually oriented. The Good News Bible gets closer to the original meaning by using the phrase, "desires of our human nature."

But, the translation which I prefer, a biblical translation which many say is the most accurate of all the translations, is the Jerusalem Bible. In this passage, the Jerusalem Bible translates "sarx" as "self-indulgence." Galatians 5:17 then reads, "Self-indulgence is the opposite of the Spirit. The Spirit is totally against such a thing, and it is precisely because the two are opposed that you do not always carry out your good intentions." Is self-indulgence your leader? Look at the results, the fruits, produced by self-indulgence. Again using the Jerusalem Bible, (Galatians 5:19-21) "When self-indulgence is at work, the results are obvious: fornication, gross indecency and sexual irresponsibility; idolatry and sorcery; feuds and wrangling, jealousy, bad temper and quarrels; disagreements, factions, envy; drunkenness, orgies and similar things. I warn you now, as I warned you before: those who behave like this will not inherit the kingdom of God." It was Oscar Wilde who said, "In this world there are only two tragedies. One is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it."

An even more colloquial and modern, relevant translation of self-indulgence is "Me First." Our American ancestors cried, "Give me liberty." Today, too many Americans cry, "Give me!" "Look out for Number One" is a popular creed. The first question asked when making an evaluation is often, "What's in it for me?" Too often our nation asks that question of its foreign policy: what's in it for America, rather than what is best for the world? How do we benefit, rather than how can the most people benefit? Our nation has even decided to ignore the verdict of the World Court. This is the

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first time in the history of the Court! The International Court of Justice of the United Nations has indicted the United States of violating international law and previous treaties with Nicaragua because of our support of rebels who are attempting to overthrow the Nicaraguan government. I am upset that my country considers itself above international law. We are living in a time when the concept of one world must take precedence over Me First, commonly translated, "My country, right or wrong."

Taylor Caldwell, who ordinarily is not one of my favorite authors, has given us an extreme definition of Me First. She writes in Bright Flows the River, pg. 8, "Fools are concentrated on themselves; all the rest of the world is only a reflection in the mirror of their profound self-absorption and belief in their own importance. Nothing authentic exists for them; they have no values, no dedication beyond their own walls, no meditations. They aren't alive." To follow the leader, Me First, results in a lack of interest in anyone else. Conversations are superficial. Other people are manipulated to serve the self-interests of Me First. A Me First person lacks the capacity to identify with anyone else. He/she is unable to relate to another person's pain or despair.

We all have problems with self-indulgence, hopefully not to the extreme of being incapable of relating to other people; but, we are tempted by Me First, and we often vacillate between the Spirit and self-indulgence. I remember talking to a man several years ago who was in the midst of his mid-life crisis. He was thinking of divorce. He said he was unhappy in his marriage, and made the statement, with a touch of self-pity, "Where do I fit in? When do I do something just for me, just for my pleasure?" A touch of Me First. I responded, "When you marry and when you become a father, you are not first; you are probably third or fourth in priority." First place belongs to Christ, your leader. In second place is your wife. Third is the children. Somewhere down the line, you rate a little attention!

In fact, if you are not willing to be #4, don't get married. The system works when the wife also sees herself as #4 and puts the husband in second place, next to Christ. Then, you have a marriage of mutuality, interdependence and love where each is concerned for the other's fulfillment, pleasure and happiness.

Paul's meaning in the lesson today is clear. If it is your intention to be sexually irresponsible, jealous, envious; have a bad temper and be quarrelsome, then declare self-indulgence--Me First--to be your leader. If you want to be part of a church where there are factions, disagreements, and wrangling, declare self-indulgence to be your leader. If you want a marriage and a family where there is sexual infidelity, jealousy, anger, bad temper, then cultivate self-indulgence as your leader.

But, if not, then choose your leader carefully. Hear the promise in Galatians 5:16, "If you are guided by the Spirit you will be in no danger of yielding to self-indulgence." When the Holy Spirit is your leader, then (5:13), "Serve one another in works of love, since the whole of the Law is summarized in a single command: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" Husband and wife,

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parents and children, friends, church family, nations: serve one another in works of love. Then Me First is dethroned. The Spirit becomes your leader. Mark Twain said it this way, "Let us choose to so live that when we come to die, even the undertaker will be sorry."

Get your priorities straight. Put Christ first and open yourself to the guidance of the Spirit. When making decisions, ask, "What does Christ want me to do? What is the will of God? What best serves the needs and future of my spouse, my children? How can I best serve people?"

Life is a matter of choosing: Who do you want to be? What do you want to be? What do you want out of life? Then, choose your leader carefully. Choose the leader who will help you carry out your good intentions. Whom will you follow? Jesus Christ or Me First? The Holy Spirit or self-indulgence?