

"Let's Make a Deal!"

(DEUTERONOMY 30:15-20 NRSV) *See, I have set before you today life and prosperity, death and adversity. ¹⁶If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I am commanding you today, by loving the LORD your God, walking in his ways, and observing his commandments, decrees, and ordinances, then you shall live and become numerous, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to possess. ¹⁷But if your heart turns away and you do not hear, but are led astray to bow down to other gods and serve them, ¹⁸I declare to you today that you shall perish; you shall not live long in the land that you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess. ¹⁹I call heaven and earth to witness against you today that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Choose life so that you and your descendants may live, ²⁰loving the LORD your God, obeying him, and holding fast to him; for that means life to you and length of days, so that you may live in the land that the LORD swore to give to your ancestors, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob.*

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(MATTHEW 5:21-24; 27-32 NIV) *"You have heard that it was said to those of ancient times, 'You shall not murder'; and 'whoever murders*

shall be liable to judgment.' ²²*But I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council; and if you say, 'You fool,' you will be liable to the hell of fire. ²³So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, ²⁴leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift. ... ²⁷"You have heard that it was said, 'You shall not commit adultery.'* ²⁸*But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart. ²⁹If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. ³⁰And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to go into hell. ³¹"It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife, let him give her a certificate of divorce.'* ³²*But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.*

Bubba was flying up to New York, and somewhere over North Carolina they flew into a thunderstorm. The plane was pitching and tossing, and Bubba didn't hesitate; he went straight to the deity at hand: "Lord, if you'll just get me down safely, I'll give you half of everything I own."

Almost immediately, the turbulence stopped, and the ride was smooth as silk. They landed safely a bit later.

As they were getting off the plane, a Baptist preacher tapped Bubba on the shoulder and said, "Sir, I heard what you said back there on the plane: you said if the Lord would get you down safely you'd give him half of everything you own. I know you want to start right now."

Bubba didn't miss a beat. He said, "No, Sir; I made a better deal. I told him if I ever got back on another one, he could have it all!"

I think that describes some of what passes for Christian faith—kind of a spiritual version of "Let's Make a Deal": if we make good deals, we get to pick door #1 or door #2 or door #3. If we pick the right door, there'll be a trip to Paris, or a house

full of furniture; but if we pick the wrong door, we'll get zonked.

Remember the short story I think most of us read in high school: "The Lady or the Tiger"? A king had a beautiful daughter and established a test: any man who would court the princess would be placed in an arena, facing two doors. Behind one door would be the princess; behind the other door a tiger who had not eaten in days. There were no takers, until one day a handsome prince showed up to court the princess. The author painstakingly describes the young man's struggle to decide which door: the left? or the right?" Finally, he places his hand on the chosen door handle. The door swings open, and the story ends. Did he choose "The Lady or the Tiger?"

Choices can be like that: shrouded in mystery and intrigue and risk. But, sometimes the choices offered in scripture seem a lot less ambiguous; in fact, they seem so clear it's easy to perceive them set in concrete.

In today's Hebrew scripture, Moses is winding down a very long speech on the banks of the Jordan river, just before Israel is to enter the Promised Land. Moses knows the entry into the new land will be an ominous moment. The people will face not only well-trained armies, but also the temptations that come with prosperity and the acquisition of abundance. There will be alternative ethical options, alternative faith expressions, alternative modes of power—but no "alternative facts."

During forty years of wandering in the desert, Israel had developed comprehensive rules and prescriptions regarding personal conduct and worship; and there were clear consequences for failure to conform to the prescribed expectations.

And now, on the banks of the Jordan river, Moses says, *"This day ... I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live."* There is a choice; but there also are consequences.

And in today's gospel text, Jesus doesn't cut us much slack, either. If anything, he seems to clamp down even harder: *"You have heard, 'Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.' But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment. ... You have heard, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart."*

That's pretty stern. Even Jimmy Carter, President of the United States—good Southern Baptist boy from Georgia—had trouble with that last one.

Or, how about that anger thing? How often do you go 24 hours without being angry? "Highway rage" is now in the American vocabulary: people forcing each other off the road; assaulting one another—even shooting one another—because they were "cut off" in heavy traffic! Court judgments include "anger therapy" in many cases—even for traffic violations.

In a culture where human sexuality is marketed openly, and "Anger Clinics" are booming, many Christians may need to review their baptism—make sure the fire insurance has not lapsed.

In our day, more than ever, Moses' counsel is on target: *"I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live."* And, while Jesus' words may appear sharp and unbending, there may be some merit precisely in their rigidity, particularly in a world where the behavior of Christians can't always be distinguished from that of non-Christians.

What if the choices offered were not so much "**prescriptive**" as "**descriptive**?" not so much "Ultimatum" as "Invitation?" not so much restricting of behavior as envisioning possibility?

In each of Jesus' comments, he presses beyond the expressed statement of the law to a deeper concern.

For example, the first comment is about the command not to murder. Now, in the typical coffee shop discussion, the response goes something like this: "Thou shalt no kill"? But, what about war; or what if someone breaks into our home? Aren't we supposed to protect our families and our country? And the issue of capital punishment usually comes up.

W.C. Fields, the comedian, was known as a heavy drinker and carouser; and he certainly was not reputed to be religious; and so when a friend found him reading the Bible, he asked, "What are you doing?" Fields replied, "Looking for loopholes."

The typical human approach to law is not obedience; it's, "How much can I get away with?" The speed limit is 65, so I'll set my cruise at 72. "How much of the law can I break without having to pay the consequences?" The law is seen as restricting; taking away freedom; preventing us from enjoying life.

In contrast, Jesus offers hope for a life liberated through concrete acts of reconciliation. He describes a wonderful worship service heading toward the presentation of the offering, when suddenly chaos breaks out. People begin moving around the sanctuary to be reconciled with alienated fellow members. Who is right or wrong seems to be irrelevant. At issue is the disrupted relationship and the need is not justification, but healing.

Or in Jesus' comments on adultery, he is calling for relationships of wholeness between males and females. This is a radical position in a culture that viewed women as property.

Nor does the statement on divorce advocate staying trapped in a relationship that has died or become abusive. In Jesus' culture, a husband could divorce a wife on any grounds he chose, simply by saying to her, in the presence of witnesses, three times: "I divorce you." Jesus speaks of women as persons with dignity and rights, and in today's text he calls for husbands to relate to their wives at a level deeper than the "grunt" level: "Me Tarzan; you Jane. Fix my supper!"

Jesus does not speak of the law as a prescription for human behavior, but rather as a description of a quality of life and relationship in which God is the highest value. What are the probable consequences of a relationship characterized by forgiveness and reconciliation and open communication? There will not be murder in such a relationship.

What are the probable consequences of a marriage characterized by open communication and mutual respect and loving sacrifice? There will be neither adultery nor divorce in such a relationship.

It is in that same context that Jesus wraps up his sermon on the mount with these words: "Seek first the kingdom of God, and God's righteousness, and all these things will be added as well." You see, in Jesus' deal, we're shown what's behind each door—before we have to choose. Why would anybody not choose this door?