

CHOICES

It was one of the most gripping stories of 2003. In the beautiful but desolate mountains of southeastern Utah, a 27 year-old mountain climber named Aaron Ralston, made a desperate decision. An avid outdoors man, Aaron was rock climbing one day when his right arm became trapped under a boulder, a boulder estimated to weigh at least 800 pounds. He saw immediately that he was in deep trouble. Unable to budge the rock at all, Aaron took out his pocketknife and chipped away at the rock for 10 hours, managing to produce only a small handful of dust. Obviously this was not going to work. Days were passing. No one knew where he was. Even worse, his family and friends were used to his going off for days without contacting anyone, so they were not even looking for him. With his arm still wedged beneath this enormous boulder Aaron recorded a video message to his parents telling them good-bye.

At the end of several days with no food or water, however, Aaron made a remarkable choice. Aaron Ralston decided to amputate his arm in order to save himself. And that's exactly what he did, using only a pocket knife. What an amazing display of courage and determination. After he was finished, he applied a tourniquet to his arm and rappelled nearly 70 feet to the floor of the canyon. Then he hiked five miles downstream where he encountered some other hikers and was rescued. Aaron Ralston made the obviously excruciating decision to amputate his right arm to save his life.

Who can read this story without thinking of Jesus' words from our lesson today, "If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell." What a stark declaration. Is this on the same level as those societies that cut off the hands of thieves? We view that as barbaric. This is not the Jesus we prefer. We like a soft Jesus, one who talks like a guru from the 1960's about peace and love and how we are all God's children. This harsher, more strident Jesus offends our live-and-let-live sensibilities. Obviously Jesus did not mean literally that we are to cut off an offending appendage. Still the words convey an earnestness that we ought to heed. "If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off." Sometimes in life we have to choose. Isn't that what Jesus is saying? You really can't have it all. Sometimes you have to choose. Aaron Ralston certainly made a choice—sacrifice his arm in order to save his life. There are choices that must be made in life and those choices determine our destiny.

Some members may remember the time-honored story about an old country preacher who had a teenage son. One day, while the boy was at school, his father decided to try an experiment. He went into the boy's room and placed on his desk three objects: a Bible, a silver dollar, and a bottle of whiskey. "Now then," the old preacher said to himself, "I'll just hide behind the door here, and when my son comes home from school this afternoon, I'll see which of these three objects he picks up. If

he picks up the Bible, he's going to be a preacher like me. If he picks up the dollar, he's going to be a businessman, and that would be okay, too. But if he picks up the bottle of whiskey, he's going to be a no-good drunkard." Soon the old man heard his son's footsteps as he came in the house. He watched as the boy walked over to inspect the three items on the desk. First, the boy picked up the Bible and placed it under his arm. Then he picked up the silver dollar and dropped it into his pocket. Finally, he uncorked the bottle and took a big drink. "Lord have mercy," the old man whispered, "He's gonna be a politician!"

I guess we could say that, unless you're going to be a politician, you are going to have to make some choices in life. Life is a matter of choices. Choices about how we spend our time. Choices about how we spend our money. Choices about what we think are important. In Death Valley, there is a place known as Dante's View. From this location you can look down into the lowest spot in the United States, a depression in the earth 200 feet below sea level called Black Water. But from Dante's View you can also look up to the highest peak in the United States, Mt. Whitney, rising to a height of 14'500 feet. In one direction you move to the lowest spot in the United States, in the other, to the highest. From Dante's view, only the traveler can decide which direction he or she will take.

There are choices we must make. Just as Aaron Ralston made the obviously excruciating decision to amputate his arm, so there are choices each of us must make. If you're going to have a healthy body, there are choices you must make about what you eat and what you drink. If you're going to have a healthy spiritual life there are choices you must make about the input you give your mind. If you're going to have a healthy marriage and a healthy family, there are choices you're going to have to make every day.

Speaker and author Carol Kent was confronted with this hard truth one day when she and her young son, Jason, were eating breakfast together. Carol had on an old pair of slacks and a fuzzy old sweater. Jason flashed his baby blue eyes at her over his cereal bowl and said, "Mommy, you look pretty today." Carol was shocked he would say that since she didn't even have makeup on! So she said, "Honey, why would you say I look pretty today? Normally I'm dressed in a suit and high heels." And Jason, "When you're dressed in a suit and high heels I know you're going someplace; but when you look like this, I know you're mine." Carol Kent said Jason's words were like an arrow piercing her heart. She realized she might fail at being a godly Christian mother because she was saying yes to so many speaking engagements. She says she got on her knees with her precious appointment book and offered it to God.

Every day of our lives we are confronted with choices. Most of these are relatively easy choices. They require little of our time and energy. When you got ready this morning, you probably didn't

have many agonizing choices to make about what to wear. I hope you didn't agonize too much over whether to come to church. But our lives consist of the choices we make. The most important choice, of course, is the choice to follow Jesus. It really doesn't matter in the long run of things where you choose to live, what kind of car you drive, what kind of music you listen to. The only thing that really matters is whether you consciously seek to be all that God means for you to be. I realize that I may need to convince some of you of that. Many of us are what might be called, "of course" Christians. That is, if I were to ask you, are you a Christian, you might say, "of course." My parents are Christians; I've gone to church all my life. I am not Jewish or Buddhist or even agnostic. Of course I am a Christian. Unfortunately the world is filled with "of course" Christians. That's different from the kind of Christian who follows Jesus.

Some of you are familiar with superstar singer Mary J. Blige. Blige is a three-time Grammy Award winning rhythm and blues and hip-hop soul singer, songwriter and producer. She has had several #1 songs. Many people regard her as today's queen of soul. Mary J. Blige has changed her image significantly over the course of her career, and she credits much of that change to her newfound faith in Jesus Christ. Blige claims that her early years in show business were marred by heavy alcohol and drug abuse. She projected an image of toughness, but inside she was hurting. One day Blige read an interview with superstar Beyonce in which Beyonce spoke of her love for her mother and father. Blige found herself crying over the desire to experience that kind of love. In recent years, after giving her life to Jesus, Mary J. Blige is able to say, "It was later, when I gave my life to Jesus Christ, that I found out who I am. I'm a child of God. God is my mother and father. That's the only thing that'll keep my head up. If I don't remember who I am in him, I'm done." It was important for Mary J. Blige to find Jesus. I believe you will agree with me on that. But, you think to yourself, "I don't have her kinds of problems. What difference does it make to me whether I become one of Christ's followers, rather than being just an of course Christian? What difference does it make whether I become one who really is affected by Christ's presence in my life?"

Let me ask you a couple of important questions. First, is it important to you to live an effective life? Some people live lives that have no real impact on the world around them. Maybe you know someone like this. They're there, but that is about all you can say about them. They're nice people. They don't do any real harm; it's just that the world won't be much affected by their passing. And no one will miss them that much. They haven't lived bad lives, just ineffective ones. Our faith in Christ should give unity and purpose to our lives and help us to be more effective in every area of our lives. If our faith is alive, it helps us to bind up our lives into a unified whole. Our commitment to Christ affects how effectively we operate, for example, as parents. When we define ourselves as a "Christian" parent, that says things about how seriously we take our role as fathers and mothers.

Our, children become a great priority in our lives. We make time for them; we seek to gently guide them into ways of righteousness and love. We stand by them when they are in trouble, and we never give up on them. Why? Because we have made a commitment to be the best parents we can be.

The chaplain of a state prison received a request from a father of a young man who was interned at the prison. The young man had committed a robbery and had been sentenced for many years in jail. He was angry and embittered. The boy's father came each week to visit him, but the boy steadfastly refused to see him. The chaplain was asked to intervene, to plead with the boy to see his father, but the young prisoner refused. Despite his refusal, the boy's father took off work every week, boarded a bus, and traveled across the state in the hope of seeing his son. Every week. It became the young minister's difficult task each week to ask the son, "Do you want to see your dad?" Then he had to bear word of the refusal to the waiting father. The father would thank the chaplain, gather his belongings, and head toward the door for the bus trip home.

One day after telling the father that once again his son would not meet with him, the chaplain said, "No one would do what you are doing. Your son is an embittered, defiant young man. Give up. Go back home and get on with your life. No one would put up with this kind of rejection, week after week. Nobody would do this." The older man looked the younger one straight in the eye. Then he said, "God has put up with it for centuries." He picked up his meager belongings and headed out the door. That father couldn't give up on his son. Part of it was his love for his son. Part of it was who he, the father, was- a follower of Jesus Christ. Our faith binds up our life in a unified whole. If you are a follower of Christ you are a better marriage partner, you are a better parent, you are a more dependable employee or employer, and you are a more responsible member of the community- all of life is enhanced when you follow the humble Galilean. Your life is more effective, and has more impact, when you follow Jesus.

The first question was, are you interested in an effective life? The second question is, are you interested in living an eternal life? Jesus gave us an important promise following his resurrection, "where I am, you may be also." We don't talk much about that promise, except at funerals or on Easter Sunday. But it is a critical part of our faith. Eternal life is a gift that God gives us because of His love for us and because of what Christ has done in our behalf.

"If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off." It's not one of Jesus' more popular teachings. But it says to us in a stark way that a choice must be made. We cannot forever straddle the fence. Are you on Christ's side or not? Christ promises us a more effective life and the gift of eternal life. All we have to do in return is say, "YES"