

CHOOSING SIDES

A little over two years ago, I began doing something that I have never done before. I started watching a webcast- two of them actually- on a regular basis. Those of you that know me well, know that I am a big Auburn fan. I've discovered two Auburn webcasts that I love to watch.

It began after Auburn first hired Brian Harsin as their head football Coach. Like many Auburn fans, I had no clue who he was. I knew nothing about him, so I went to the internet to try to learn something about him. After that I became hooked on watching these two webcasts.

The last six months or so have been fascinating. Frankly, I've never seen anything like it. Of course, most of you know that Brian Harsin was fired, and Coach Hugh Freeze was hired to replace him. In just the last six months, Coach Freeze has completely turned over the roster of the football team in a way that I don't think would ever have been possible in the past. It's the transfer portal that has made this possible. Until just the past two or three weeks, it has seemed as if we were getting a new, high-profile player every other day. Half or more of the starting roster has been replaced. I don't what the result of that will be, but there is one thing I know for sure; for the first time in several years, I'm excited to see what the Auburn football season is going to look like when fall comes. I'm excited to hear it begin.

Now, it's funny to hear myself say that, because, truthfully, I've never been very athletic. When I was a kid, the class I hated most was PE. I was one of the last ones chosen to play whenever we chose teams. On the rare occasions where I got to pick the teams, nobody really wanted me to pick them, because they didn't want to play with me. I just wasn't any good. In fact, I don't think it's a stretch to say that I am in better shape today at age 59, than I was at any point during high school. I'm not sure if I should be ashamed of that or proud of it. Though I have to say that there was brief period in College where I was in better shape. Not only was I in poor shape, but I wasn't particularly skilled at any one sport. Sports was not a comfortable place for me growing up.

Now, I'm not bitter about any of this. Honestly, I've come to accept it. But I've thought about this nature of picking sides when I read this passage. In our lives we have to choose sides many times. If we're playing a game, we have to choose the players. If we are in a supervisory position at work, we have to choose our employees. We choose our significant others. We choose our friends and associates, and the list goes on and on.

It's more than just choosing people. We have to make choices in life. What will we do for a living? Where will we work? Where will we live? What will we do when we're not working? How will we spend our money?

Then we have more abstract philosophical decisions to make. What do we really believe: politically? Spiritually? Morally? What causes do we support? How will we act? How will we treat others? How will we make a difference in the world? How will we make our mark?

Each of us here today because we made a choice. We chose to come to Copeland church. Perhaps, we're here because we chose to be Presbyterian. More importantly, we're here because we chose to follow Christ. More on that in a moment.

Now, I'm belaboring this point about making a choice because, in this passage Jesus gives us some insight into the choices we have to make. I wonder how often you've taken a look at this passage. I wonder if it bothered you the first time you read it, as it bothered me.

Let's look at what Jesus says in this passage.

34 "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. 35 For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; in-law; 36 and one's foes will be members of one's own household. 37 Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; "and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. "Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it. 40 "Whoever welcomes you welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. 41Whoever welcomes a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward; and whoever welcomes a righteous person in the name of a righteous person will receive the reward of the righteous; 42and whoever gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones in the name of a disciple-truly truly I tell you, none of these will lose their reward."¹

Now, I don't know about you, but I have found this to be a particularly difficult passage to follow. I have found it to be easy to follow the instructions not to kill and not to steal. I haven't had that much trouble loving my neighbor or forgiving those who sin against me, though I will admit that I haven't always gotten those two right. But asking me to love God more than my mother and father or my daughters or my wife- that's hard to do. There my human frailty is likely to get the best of me.

What is Jesus talking about here? Well, there are several issues raised for me by this passage. There are biblical, theological, and cultural issues raised by this passage. I'm going to begin with the biblical issue. This seems to fly in the face of the commandment to Honor Thy Father and Thy Mother. I'm not a Rabbi, and don't pretend to be. Honestly, I have too much respect for my Jewish colleagues to believe that I'm qualified to be a Rabbi. However, given the limited amount that I know, I think that had I been a Rabbi and been present to hear Jesus say that, that would have been my first question. Doesn't this fly in the face of that commandment to honor your Father and your Mother?

¹ Bruce Malina;Richard L. Rohrbaugh. Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels (p. 90). Kindle Edition.

But as I say this, consider this. In another passage, Jesus is asked the question, "What is the greatest commandment in the Law?" He responds, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and all thy soul and all thy strength and all thy might." This clearly places the love of God above all else. Actually, the Ten Commandments that I quoted just a few moments ago begin at the same point. The first Commandment is, "I am the Lord Thy God. Thou shalt have no other gods before me." So, it's entirely appropriate for Jesus to ask us to put God first.

Here's the thing, though; that isn't what he literally says. Jesus asks us to put him first. Now, let's set aside Christian doctrine for a moment. Trust me, we'll come back to it in a moment. I'm just going to set it aside for a few moments. For now, let's just consider it from the standpoint of those who witnessed it as it happened.

You see we believe that Jesus is God-Christians believe that- but the people hearing it for the first time hadn't come to that conclusion yet. This was just the crowd. Jesus hasn't been crucified yet. The church hasn't formed yet. So, the people that were there wouldn't have come to that conclusion that Jesus is God. So, for him to place himself in that position raises the question, "Does he think that he's God?"

There's another question here, and this gets to the sociological issue. In that world, to follow the advice that Jesus gives here would make one a social outcast. The vast majority of people were totally dependent upon their families for everything in the ancient world. To separate yourself from your family would mean more than creating bad blood with your family. It would also mean to lose your job, your friends, and your standing in the community. Most people were totally dependent on two things for their livelihood: their families and the patronage of a powerful Lord. A sweeping discussion of ancient economic practice is beyond the scope of this sermon, so just trust me. A person separating from their family would be destitute.

Furthermore, as I said they would become a social outcast. This was considered dishonorable behavior. Such behavior would likely lead to that person being shunned by the community. You would become a virtual stranger in your own town. What Jesus suggests would make a person a pariah.

But this very formulation, this radical idea that Jesus puts forward, sets the basis for our understanding of who Jesus is and what it means to truly follow him. As I said, it's now time to come back to Christian Doctrine that I set aside a few moments ago. According to the doctrine of the Trinity, the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are all one. They are one God in three distinct persons. So, it's appropriate for Jesus to ask us to put him first because he *is* God. When we put him first we put God first.

We also need to understand what it means to take Jesus as Lord. We're about to celebrate the birth of our country. Nearly two hundred and fifty years ago the United States created a new government. They created a democracy. Since that day, we have had no Kings; we have had no Lords, and Americans wouldn't take to them very well I don't think. We're a people

who do not like others telling us what to do. So, the concept of monarchy is a foreign one for us. However, that system of Government was the very fabric on which the Ancient World was woven. To have a government was to have a Lord in those days. This concept is crucial to understanding what our relationship with Christ is supposed to be. We are told to make him our Lord.

The relationship of Lord is supposed a covenantal one. The Lord promises to protect and support the servant. The servant promises to serve and obey. So, if we proclaim Jesus as Lord, why do find it so hard to obey? We do we make this so much about what Jesus does for us, and so little about how we are to serve Jesus? That's an important question for us to ask.

I don't really want people to look at me and say, "That man really believes in Jesus Christ." I want more from myself than that. I want people to look at me and say, "That man serves Christ." I want to go far beyond belief.

Does Jesus really want us to turn our backs on our families? I suspect not. He's just trying to make a point. If we're going to take Jesus as our Lord, we need to take that seriously. If he's our Lord, then we must be his servants. People need to be able to look at us and say, "That person is a servant of Jesus." Our behavior and our actions need to show that our purpose is to serve Christ. Anything less calls our loyalty to Christ into question.

So, we're left with one big question. When it comes to Jesus Christ, whose side are we on?