

*"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul,
and with all your mind, and with all your strength...You shall love your
neighbor as yourself...there is no other commandment greater than these..."*
[Mark 12:30-31]



Living The Affirming Life



*"Father, if you are willing, take this cup away from me;
still, not my will but yours be done."*

[Luke 22:42]

In This Issue:

- No Choice, No Grace? - Page 2*
- Dishonest Honest People - Page 4*
- Dethroning Immorality - Page 5*
- As a Spiritual Being - Page 8*
- Dying To Ambition - Page 9*
- The Father's Love Letter - Page 10*

No Choice, No Grace?

By Micky Wolf

"I have no choice..." or "God's grace isn't on it." Whether used together or singularly, the fact that we often believe these expressions to be true is food for prayer and pondering. Why?

Scripture gives a lot of attention to choice and choosing. Both concepts appear more than 500 times throughout the Bible. God leaves little to doubt that He has not only gifted us with the free will to make choices, but that He desires we choose well. Two of many examples:

"...Choose life so that you and your descendants may live..."
[Deut. 30:19]

"...[c]hoose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the Lord." [Joshua 24:15]

NO CHOICE?

Stating "I have no choice" is more indicative of believing there is only one option in our thinking, feeling or acting in a given situation rather than understanding the fullness of the gift of free will. To accept, especially as Christians, that we are boxed into a corner that offers little hope for meaningful peace or joy because our options are so limited is simply not the truth of what God desires for us. For the person who desires to live the affirming life—loving God, others and self in the image and likeness of Christ—is to be one open to possibilities beyond the limitations of our thinking and self-imposed prison bars.

Reticent to embrace the reality of the divine principle that sooner or later we reap what we sow, we will find ourselves entangled in a web of half-truths, dissatisfied and restless with life amidst circumstances we would just as soon blame on others or use as fodder for unhealthy self-recrimination and abuse. Example: If I sow resentment into my thoughts, words or deeds, the fruits of bitterness and anger manifest. If I sow self-pity, victim mentality and judgmental attitudes will emerge.

Having struggled in the past with both, I can tell you these fruits are neither fragrant or tasty—and certainly not loving. On the other hand, if I sow patience, I often reap peace of spirit and a deeper sense of trust in God's provision in all things. Likewise, if I sow honesty and authenticity, I reap God's love and blessings, often through those He places in my life. **CONTINUED ON PAGE 3**

Affirmation Ministries

Founding Directors:

Micky M. Wolf
Gregory S. Wolf

Advisory Board:

Executive Director: Micky M. Wolf

Chair: Donna Shadle
Elementary School Principal

Spiritual Advisor: Patricia Witecha, RN

Treasurer: Dominick Gambone III
IT Manager

Secretary: Jeannie Smith

Henedine Aldana, MD
Gregory S. Wolf

Ministries:

Intercessory Prayer, Chair: Jackie Schatz
Event Coordinator: Susan Niehaus

Living the Affirming Life
Copyright © 2010 by Affirmation Ministries
Published quarterly.

This publication is distributed freely upon request and exists to further the teaching goals of this ministry.



Contact Us:
Affirmation Ministries
2207 Mohler Dr NW
North Canton, Ohio, 44720

Phone: 330.497.9772
www.affirmationministries.org
Email: info@affirmationministries.org

Donations always welcome and warmly received.

Tax Exempt, 501(c)(3)
Non-Profit Organization

NO CHOICE NO GRACE CONTINUED...

There are some instances where “I have no choice” does not mean being closed to the possibilities God may be allowing for our discernment, but rather is evidence of clarity of vision and purpose. When the prophet Jeremiah speaks of the urgency on his heart to voice God’s truth to his fellow citizens, he gives us a powerful example of singularly focused intent: “The words are fire in my belly, a burning in my bones. I’m worn out trying to hold it in. I can’t do it any longer!” [Jer. 20:9] When Paul is writing to the people of Corinth, he expresses a similar clarity of conviction when he states: “For woe is unto me if I preach not the gospel.” [1 Cor. 9:16] Similarly, when we ponder Jesus’ experience in the Garden of Gethsemane, there is little doubt He is struggling with understanding what God’s will is for Him. Scripture is very clear in spelling out his experiences of making choices within the context of his being human: “For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but *one who has similarly been tested in every way, yet without sin.*” [Heb. 4:15 - Emphasis added] His choice to accept the cup of suffering and the death that followed was as focused as it gets.

All three men shared one thing in common: ‘having no choice’ meant persevering in living a God-centered life that would include numerous opportunities in various guises to distract them from their singular focus. The option to choose something other than the loving action was as available to them as it is to us now, thousands of years later. Options abound; being singularly focused rather than believing we have no choice are two very different ways of thinking and feeling, but in the end, both turn on openness, discernment and courage in order to make a decision that best reflects God’s love and His will at work in our lives.

NO GRACE?

Believing the grace glass is empty is simply not true. *When we pray and ask for God’s will rather than our own, He doesn’t ignore us.* He will give us insight about the possible choices we can make [sowing] and the potential fruit [reaping] we can experience. He will speak to us through Scripture, prayer, other people and the circumstances of life. In the process, He won’t extend or withdraw His grace like some stingy, demanding father. His grace is not withheld or rationed based on man’s understanding of measure; it is apportioned in the measure needed to carry out the loving, Christ-like actions God *hopes* we will choose. If we believe ‘the grace is not on it’ [“it” being a certain choice/action] it may very well be we need to look at the choice we are making and ask ourselves: is this more about having my way than God’s way? About believing only one option exists? Being unaware that opting to believe I don’t have to make any choice is ultimately the greatest deception? The latter question may be the most difficult to face as *indifference* is often the bitter tasting and unsatisfying fruit that is produced when we abdicate our responsibilities as Christians.

“My grace is sufficient for you...” [2 Cor. 12:9]

*“So let us confidently approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and to find grace for timely help.”
[Heb. 4:16]*

There are many ways “to approach the throne of grace” but there is something very basic to putting this process in motion—*making the personal choice* to approach. I may walk, run, or even crawl to the store to get the milk, but without the simple choice and action on my part to obtain it, it will not show up in my refrigerator. The fact I can’t see the milk in the refrigerator doesn’t mean it isn’t available. It does mean, however, that I have to want it bad enough to

CONTINUED ON PAGE 8

Dishonest Honest People

By Dr. Les Carter

No doubt, you know some people who can tell lies and twist stories with hardly a twinge of guilt. There is an entire class of people who have a low enough regard for morality that they will say or do whatever is necessary to push their agenda. To them, truth is an expedient commodity that can quickly give way to self-centered desires.

Others, however, would be aghast at the thought of telling lies. Recognizing truth to be a primary virtue, these persons work hard to maintain a reputation of trustworthiness. Being called a liar would be a consummate insult and they would certainly do nothing overt to be thought of in that manner.

What would you think if I suggested that many honest and forthright individuals are not nearly as honest as they would have you believe? I am not suggesting that they are skilled liars who have just done a better job of conning the people who know them best. I am suggesting that sometimes we can each be dishonest without overtly telling lies. In fact, many times when this dishonesty occurs, they may not recognize that they are engaging in wrong behavior. Perhaps we could call this covert dishonesty.

Have you ever been covertly dishonest? Let me give you an example of what I mean. Suppose a person is strapped financially, yet he publicly portrays himself as one who is financially stable and even wears a Rolex watch. That would be covert dishonesty. Or suppose that a woman has a history of anxiety attacks but makes it very clear via her "together" behavior that no one will ever know that she has any emotional stresses at all. Again, this would be covert dishonesty. Another example would include a single man or woman who pretends to be satisfied with life, yet secretly struggles with anger and depression. Or perhaps a person has feelings of bitterness toward an acquaintance yet in public treats that person like a cherished friend. It could be that a man disagrees vehemently with a friend about a favorite subject, yet feigns harmony. The possibilities of covert dishonesty are endless.

Let's recognize that there certainly are moments when tact and discretion are needed as we determine what to reveal and what not to reveal to others. Because deep and full communication requires both time and commitment, not all of our relationships can be typified by wide-open self-disclosures. It simply is not possible to be one hundred percent transparent with all people one hundred percent of the time.

That understood, you can still minimize your tendency toward covert dishonesty. As broadly as common sense would allow, you can develop a reputation as genuine, meaning that your external appearances are consistent with your internal ingredients. You can value traits like openness and self-disclosure and accountability and authenticity. The willingness to receive feedback from others, however unflattering, is a good sign that you want honesty in your life. Likewise, the willingness to speak candidly about what is on your heart is an indicator of the same.

Whether we are aware of it or not, most of us received lessons in our early years that taught us to be calculated in the ways we interact with others. Recall, for instance, if you ever spoke words of anger to an authority figure. Were you taken seriously by that person? Even if you handled the communication poorly, was that person willing to talk with you about the best ways to discuss grievances? Most people who look into the past will remember feeling very guarded when they were in the presence of certain people. Rather than feeling permitted to expose their truest thoughts and feelings, they instead learned to hide what might bring rebuke.

True honesty is typified by a lack of strong defense and by a commitment to personal disclosures, as opposed to cautious positioning, and this is a habit that can be deliberately developed even if it was not taught in childhood. Dishonest honest people can be identified as those who work too hard to keep up proper appearances, who find it difficult to admit obvious flaws, and who feel awkward discussing matters of a deeply personal nature. While they may not overtly tell lies, their acquaintances eventually discover that they do not really know them as well as they once thought they did.

[Reprinted by Affirmation Ministries with permission of the author]

Dethroning Immorality

By Andrew Comiskey

Sexual immorality breaks into one's personal boundaries and invades the soul. Lust holds the heart captive. The illicit lover--real or imagined--prowls around the boundaries that surround the heart. If no access is found, the lover departs in frustration. Any vulnerable place in the wall will be hit upon until the heart yields to the beckoning lover. Then lust is conceived. The heart unites with an erotic illusion that impregnates the soul with images that can't be shaken and with desires that can't be satisfied. Innocence lost. In the words of James 1:14-15:



“Every (wo)man is tempted when, by his own desire, he is dragged away and enticed. Then after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.”

Sexual immorality kills. It perverts the awesome mystery of "two expressing a togetherness already found" [Lewis Smedes, *Sex for Christians*] into a premature grasp at identity and well-being. Instead of celebrating the hard work of two becoming one, sexual immorality seeks to be a celebration in its own right. Committed love neither precedes nor proceeds it. The result is a rape of the body, soul and spirit. A foreign love invades one's inner sanctuary—a holy place reserved only for Jesus, the high priest, as well as for one's spouse.

House of Prostitution

Instead, like a desecrater of the temple, the lover barrels through the outer courts and pillages the sanctuary. Having diverted one's attention away from the high priest, the lover assumes his own priestly posture—dark and seductive, offering a sacrament of the flesh that wars against the Spirit. The temple of God—one's own inner sanctuary—becomes a house of prostitution. It is fitting that Paul's most potent statement against sexual immorality was addressed to the Christians at Corinth, who daily battled the temptation to make an offering to the gods via sexual intercourse with a prostitute at one of the pagan houses of worship in Corinth. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 6:19-20:

Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her body for it is said: "The two will become one flesh." But he who unites himself with the Lord is one with him in Spirit. Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.

Sexual Wholeness

Paul alludes to the powerful nature of sexuality. In its proper context--heterosexual marriage—it liberates life; outside of that context, sexuality burns out of control and even threatens the one-spirit union with the Lord. To further that thought, sexual purity signals a purity of soul and spirit. That sanctuary within contains only Himself. Jesus reigns free and empowered as the Lord of one's heart, its guard, its cover, and its most faithful lover. Any earthly love-source must pass inspection.

Once admitted in that human connection will undoubtedly be refined by Christ. His Holy Presence—alive and dynamically involved in the heart's rhythms and relationships—establishes sexual wholeness. The pure heart becomes sensitized and alert to the threat of immorality. At the same time, Jesus grants the heart a healthy offense in loving and being loved. Granted access are those who draw out and meet real needs and who prompt the pure in heart to do the same; barred from intimacy are those whose broken, rebellious posture ignites a false eroticism which sparks sexual immortality, resulting in spiritual death. **CONTINUED ON PAGE 6**

DETHRONING IMMORALITY CONTINUED...

Foreign Gods

The Hebrews understood the strong tie between spiritual loyalty and sexual purity. They understood that God's call to reserve sexual activity for the heterosexual marital covenant. It represented His "marital" covenant with them as a nation. Sexual faithfulness to one marital partner testified of the Hebrew's allegiance to one God. This commitment to monogamy and monotheism contrasted sharply with the sexual and spiritual practice of nations surrounding Israel. Their beliefs in many gods corresponded with a diversity of sexual practices. For example, the Canaanites worshiped the gods and goddesses of nature, especially those signifying reproduction and fertility. The two referred to most in scripture are Baal and Ashteroth.

These deities were worshipped by the "sacrifice" of sexually-perverse activities, and were symbolized by huge, genitally shaped altars. Jeremiah decries these practices throughout the book that bears his name. Most heinous to him was the fact that the Hebrews began to perversely worship these gods alongside their relationship with Yahweh! As God's prophetic spokesman, Jeremiah cried out to the nation:

You have set up detestable idols in the house that bears my name and have defiled it. [Jeremiah 7:30]

You have forgotten me and have trusted in false gods...resulting in adulterous, lustful neighings and prostitution. [Jeremiah 13:25-27]

In Bondage

Jeremiah clearly grasped the strong tie between sexual spiritual faithfulness, as well as the link between sexual perversion and spiritual darkness. Israel 's perversion of faith--tragically expressed in sexual immorality—signaled judgment. Babylon took her captive and demanded that she bow her knee to

that nation's faith and practices. We too face the captivity wrought by sexual immorality. Our hearts become apathetic to the true God when empowered by sexual lust. The altar to Jesus becomes crowded out by offerings to Baal and Ashteroth. We cease to seek Him with a whole heart; our spiritual attention span drastically decreases. Perversion masters us and renders us spiritually dark—more hungry and vulnerable to the Evil One than to Jesus.

Gratefully, we have a powerful advocate, Christ Jesus. Unlike a mere high priest "who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, we have one who has been tempted in every way just as we are—yet without sin" [Heb 4:15]. We thus can cast down the lie that sexual immorality renders us unable to embrace Him as our deliverer. We boldly "take hold of Him and His authority to cast down every evil thing inside and outside of us that wars against His Lordship!" [Heb 4:16]

Willingness and Confession

But He won't deliver us until we really want it. Only when sexual immorality is soberly acknowledged as the life-threatening evil that it is, will one allow Jesus to assume His rightful place as Deliverer. A person needs to be awakened to the darkness in order to embrace the light. Jesus inspires that awakening. But He demands our willingness to squarely face the reality that He reveals.

The confession of sin follows. We agree with Jesus, according to His Word, that sexual immorality assaults one's body and soul and ruptures the one-spirit union with the Father. We also agree that Jesus is sufficient to cover our sin. Hand-in-hand with confession comes deliverance. The heart under siege needs to be dethroned of all the false gods rooted in immoral pursuits and practices. Jesus insists on cleansing that inner sanctuary; He desires to live singularly within us, without competing with the power

CONTINUED ON PAGE 7

DETHRONING IMMORALITY CONCLUSION...

of His Spirit, He binds the stronghold of lust as we willingly relinquish every vestige of sexual immorality of which we are consciously aware.

With each confession and renouncement before God and others, freedom is liberated. Each time we decline lust's invitation—be it in thought or deed—freedom progresses further. We practice His Presence—the reign of Jesus as the Lord of our hearts and Lover of our souls. We begin to be motivated out of the power and clarity and joy of His reign in our hearts. The foul residue of perversion eventually gets swept away. Christ's heart alone beats with ours, and out of it flows living water that continually refreshes and renews those parts formally held by the evil one.

Repairing the Hearts

Once the heart is cleansed, it needs protection. The temple walls require rebuilding. Jesus supervises their reconstruction; He does so as we learn to submit to Him every relationship, every social setting, every vulnerable moment to Him. We must understand that the formerly ransacked temple may have been cleansed in its inner courts but continues to be under the siege of the evil one. As a result, we enter into a season of deliberately seeking sanctuary in our environment. Not yet able to effectively ward off illicit in the heat of battle, we seek protective, healing encounters with God and others. The walls can't be rebuilt if the heart is continually submitted to lures too powerful for us to withstand.

Confession and prayer with others is key; non-erotic relationships that convey love without seductive intent are critical to nourishing the heart while respecting its boundaries-in-the-making. Equally vital is one's personal pursuit of Jesus. Learning to listen to His voice, and obey it, makes all the difference in discerning the heart's vulnerability,

and in turn submitting each immoral thought and motive to Him. In so doing, perversion is cast out of the temple and onto the other side of its newly restored walls.

Slowly, but surely, these walls begin to function protectively, much like skin protects the heart from outside bacteria, or at least warns the heart through pain provoked by forced entry or attack. Illicit lovers beckon but are refused; periods of intense temptation prompt the walls to signal the heart its need for reinforcement, e.g. prayerful, protective encounters with God and others. Each act of responsive obedience further strengthens the walls.

The loving reign of Jesus within the inner sanctuary flourishes. One begins to be increasingly sensitive to what [s]he can or cannot handle in potentially threatening relationships and social environments. New boundaries birth new kinds of relationships. Instead of feeding off of false eroticism, one learns to give to and receive from others the holy love of Jesus, thereby establishing the foundation for inspired intimacy. *[Reprinted by Affirmation Ministries with permission of the author]*



May God bless all of you who support the work of this Ministry. First and foremost we especially appreciate your ongoing prayers. For those who made a special donation in recent months, thank you. We entered 2010 with all expenses paid for 2009. With grateful hearts, we carry on with our mission of loving and serving others in becoming the unique person that God has created each to be.

As a Spiritual Being...

By Pope Benedict XVI / Excerpted from Caritas in Veritate [Love in Truth]

As a spiritual being, the human creature is defined through interpersonal relations. The more authentically he or she lives these relations, the more his or her own personal identity matures. It is not by isolation that man establishes his worth, but by placing himself in relation with others and with God. Hence these relations take on fundamental importance. The same holds true for peoples as well. A metaphysical understanding of the relations between persons is therefore of great benefit for their development. In this regard, reason finds inspiration and direction in Christian revelation, according to which the human community does not absorb the individual, annihilating his autonomy, as happens in the various forms of totalitarianism, but rather values him all the more because the relation between individual and community is a relation between one totality and another [St. Thomas, Summa Theologiae]. Just as a family does not submerge the identities of its individual members, just as the Church rejoices in each “new creation” (Gal. 6:15; 2 Cor. 5:17) incorporated by Baptism into her living Body, so too the unity of the human family does not submerge the identities of individuals, peoples and cultures, but makes them more transparent to each other and links them more closely in their legitimate diversity.

The theme of development can be identified with the inclusion-in-relation of all individuals and peoples within the one community of the human family, built in solidarity on the basis of the fundamental values of justice and peace. This perspective is illuminated in a striking way by the relationship between the Persons of the Trinity within the one divine Substance. The Trinity is absolute unity insofar as the three divine Persons are pure relationality. The reciprocal transparency among the divine Persons is total and the bond between each of them complete, since they constitute a unique and absolute unity. God desires to incorporate us into this reality of communion as well: “that they may be one even as we are one” [John 17:22].

NO CHOICE NO GRACE CONCLUSION...

do my part to obtain it. Simultaneously, if I get to the store and decide [choose] to pick up a six-pack and bring it home along with the milk, full well knowing I have a problem with alcohol, I can't then eschew the consequences for what happens, which leads once again to the importance of taking responsibility for free will and the broader implications of exercising that gift. To believe the choices we make will affect only ourselves is like trying to swim without getting wet. It may be that as we look around us, seeing what is unfolding in our homes, communities and the world—as well as in our hearts—we will begin to understand more fully that we do not live in isolation, that we have not been created in a vacuum. What we may believe to be an insignificant choice and subsequent action may indeed be the first of the dominos to fall in a sequence that will bear good fruit or bad upon the nearest of family and well beyond. Certainly eating an apple seemed innocent enough.

There is one occasion where choosing and grace intersect in an action of love so exquisite and generous as to almost exceed our comprehension, one for which we can be eternally grateful:

“You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name.” [John 15:16]

As long as we have breath we can take solace in this promise, continuing to open our hearts, thoughts and entire being to the gifts of grace and mercy God desires to bestow upon us as we desire to love Him, others and self. Lord, may we choose well.

Dying to Ambition

By T. Austin-Sparks

What do we expect when we go on with God, when we come right out for God?

What have we in view? Well, the answer to that question will decide whether, in relation to God, we have ambitions for something on the earth. Do you get the point? You see it is so possible to swing over your natural ambitions to spiritual aims. It is the same thing still at work, and the only difference is the direction or sphere. You can be as ambitious in the work of God as you can be in the world, and it is the same natural ambition. It is the ambitiousness of nature.



You desire - what do you desire? To see something, to have something, to be in something? Ambition for success... yes, once it was in the world - now the same ambition transferred to other things.

You see, it is very often to the children - the kindergarten - the elementary stages of faith, where there is not the capacity to take very much strain, that God has to give quick results and manifest signs. The marks of maturity are equally the withdrawing of outward manifestations and signs - the demand to walk with God alone for God's own sake. It is a mark of graduation in the school of God that He can withdraw outward things. It shows that we have passed the test as to whether we are ambitious in this life.

It is a mark of going on when we can come to the place where it is true before God that we have let go all the prosperity and success even of Christian work and Christian ministry [as men would count]. It is a sure sign of growth to be able to let go the great opportunities and the great advantages that may be had amongst Christian people...and the prizes that can be grasped...and to say: "It is all right, the Lord knows; it is for Him to give or withhold. I am not going to make a line for those prizes. I am not going to allow those things to influence my walk with God. Ambition is not going to dictate my course."

It may not seem here on earth to mean very big things - wide open doors and all that, but somehow you may take it that there is Life there - spiritual influence there - something that is counting there. In the end it will have counted. But this does sometimes first of all necessitate that conflict with ambition where all those suggestions and influences have to be laid low and we come to the place where we see that the way of Life is to go on with God though it costs us everything. The law of the Spirit of Life works in that way.

The way of Life demands that we shall get before the Lord and say, "Lord, though all my earthly prospects fade, though all my ambitions are disappointed, it is You I want. You are my ambition - my goal. If I have You, these other things will count for much less."

I believe that as we can get there... and not many of us have gotten a long way on that road... but as we can get there, we find the secret of Life, of joy, of release. I am not so sure that we shall not find that God is able to give back the prizes here. He withdraws them that we may turn from them to Himself. And when He has us for Himself, He may give something here; He may give blessing here on this earth.

But let us remember that His desire is to have us for Himself for His own sake; and as we fall into line, Life is found there. It is the way of Life. The law of Life demands that everything should be for the Lord...without any other influence or consideration...the Lord Himself.