

SHARING LIFE AT FIRST ON OCTOBER 6, 2019 BY PASTOR BOB BENDER
“iCHOOSE JESUS” FROM JOHN 7:40-53¹

Choices. There are so many in life. Beverly asks me to go to the supermarket to buy some toothpaste. So, here is what I see at the toothpaste area (pic). Once upon a time, my choice was simple: Crest, Colgate, or Pepsodent. Today, their spawn and competitors occupy entire shelves. So, there I stand pondering the 27 varieties of Crest in terror knowing whichever one I pick is going to be the wrong one. Do I pick one formulated to freshen breath, whiten teeth, control tartar, or attack gingivitis? And then when you move over to Cheerios with 11 flavors, 25 different Head & Shoulders shampoo formulas and 74 choices of Campbell’s soup, you’ve turned a trip to the grocery store into a mind blowing crisis of choices. Since 1975 the number of products in the average supermarket has swollen from 9,000 to 47,000.²

A young pastor takes up work in his first church. His first week in worship doesn’t go well. When it comes time for the congregation to sing, half of the people stand up with raised hands and clap and the other half stay seated with their arms folded. Now you have the folks standing scowling at the people seated telling them to get on their feet. Those seated are doing the same in favor of sitting for the songs. Finally, the pastor has had enough and says, “Look, our pastor emeritus and longtime former pastor certainly knows what the tradition is regarding sitting or standing for singing. I suggest one member whose opinion is for standing and one member who is for sitting come with me and we will ask him, ‘What IS the tradition for singing—standing with clapped hands or remain seated?’” The congregation agrees and the next day the three make their way to the old pastor’s home. They enter and the man who stands for the songs rushes over to him and says, “Wasn’t it the tradition in our church to stand for singing?” “No,” the pastor answers in a weak voice. “That wasn’t the tradition.” The other man jumps in excitedly. “Well then wasn’t it the tradition in our church to sit and sing?” “No,” he says. “That wasn’t the tradition either.” At this point, the new young pastor cannot control himself, “I don’t care what the tradition was! Just tell them one or the other. Do you know what goes on in our services every week? The people who are standing scowl at the people who are sitting and the people who are sitting scowl at the people who are standing!” “That was the tradition,” the elderly pastor says.

Today you are going to have to make a choice—one much more important than toothpaste or worship preference. Jesus is going to challenge you to choose today. Choose well. Choose Jesus. There are many things that should not divide people—things folks can have differing views on and still be at peace with one another because they are in the area of doctrine or preference, not dogma—Calvinist or non-Calvinist, blended or contemporary. And there are more important issues.

Why did Jesus come to earth? (answers) He came to divide (Mt. 10:34-36). Jesus is the great divider. There are things that should not divide us and then there are some things that should divide us—us meaning humanity; not those of us in this room. Opinions about Jesus have divided people since He entered this world and still do. You can’t remain neutral with Jesus. A neutral vote for Jesus is a vote of opposition. Jesus said, “He who is not for Me is against Me” (Mt. 12:30). This division over Jesus is no better seen than in John 7 as we conclude our consideration of this chapter and end our mini-series in iChoose <read John 7:40-53>.

You may be thinking, “How does this concern me?” Jesus still brings a division to everyday life. Taking a stand for Jesus is to take a stand against the world, the flesh, and the devil. So, today’s big idea is simple: iChoose Jesus as you walk down the traffic patterns of your life so you can be on the right side of the great divide.

Paul David Hewson, otherwise known as Bono, is leader of the rock band U2. Bono once did an interview with French journalist Michka Assayas. When the subject of religion came up, Bono turned the conversation to Christianity and the theme of grace; “It’s not our own good works that get us through the gates of heaven.” The journalist replied, “Such great hope is wonderful, even though it’s close to lunacy, in my view. Christ has his rank among the world’s great thinkers. But Son of God; isn’t that farfetched?” Bono’s answer is really quite remarkable. “No, it’s not farfetched to me. Look, the secular response to the Christ story always goes like this: he was a great prophet; obviously a very interesting guy; had a lot to say along the lines of other great prophets be they Elijah, Muhammad, Buddha, or Confucius. But actually, Christ doesn’t allow you that. He doesn’t let you off that hook. Christ says, ‘No. I’m not saying I’m a teacher; don’t call me teacher. I’m not saying I’m a prophet.’ I’m saying, ‘I’m the Messiah.’ I’m saying: ‘I am God incarnate.’” And people say: ‘No, no, please, just be a prophet. A prophet, we can take. You’re a bit eccentric. We’ve had John the Baptist eating locusts and wild honey; we can handle that. But don’t mention the M word! Because, you know, we’re gonna have to crucify you.’ And Jesus goes: ‘I know you’re expecting me to come back with an army and set you free from these creeps, but actually I am the Messiah.’ At this point, everyone starts staring at their shoes and says: ‘Oh, my God, he’s gonna keep saying this. So, what you’re left with is: either Christ was who He said He was—the Messiah, or a complete nutcase on the level of Charles Manson. The idea that the entire course of civilization for over half of the globe could have its fate changed and turned upside-down by a nutcase, for me, **that’s farfetched.**”

Take a stand for the real Jesus like Bono. John 7 records the religious elite and opponents to Jesus using several different ammunitions in their arsenal: ridicule (v. 47), peer pressure (v. 48), and ignorance (v. 49). With Nicodemus, they use their interpretation of the law to support their preconceived ideas of Jesus (v. 52). But the real question is, who is Jesus really and how should I respond to Him? The Pharisees had head knowledge, but it was limited, insufficient and was a barrier. As we saw earlier, heart knowledge is the key to knowing Jesus (John 7:17).

The Pharisees considered themselves infallible (v. 48), the officers deceived (v. 47), the crowd cursed (v. 49), and Nicodemus as biased (v. 51). In reality, it was the Pharisees who were deceived, cursed, and biased. Oh, how we love to think we know better than others! Where do I fit in all of this? Wrong question. Where does Jesus fit in my life? Right question. We don’t make Jesus fit our expectations; we match our expectations to fit His.

The way we get in is the way we go on. We chose Jesus initially and we continue to choose Jesus daily. I choose Jesus because He is in a class all by himself and is worth it (v. 46; Jn. 6:68).

Have you noticed that somebody always has something to say about Jesus? This division occurred often in Jesus’ ministry. After all—that’s why He came into the world. Christ is the great divider.

This division still occurs today. Ask Chick-fil-A. Ask Karen Pence. Ask one of our local church planters who was banned from a college campus because of his answer to a question regarding human sexuality. Intervarsity Christian Fellowship was banned from the University of Iowa last year where their presence had been for 25 years only to be overturned by a district court’s recent decision forcing the university to pay damages for their biased decision.

I challenge you today to choose Jesus. Choose Jesus when people are divided over Him (v. 43). Choose Jesus when people oppose Him (v. 49). Choose Jesus when people oppose you (v. 52). Nicodemus, who originally came to Jesus by night stealthily for a private conversation, now takes a stand in the day as a stellar example for all of us. He risked losing everything. Choose Jesus

because only Jesus has the authority and is in a class all by Himself (v. 46). Choose Jesus over other religious leaders. Choose Jesus over other lifestyles. Choose Jesus over your own selfishness.

In what country is the church of Jesus Christ growing the fastest today? Iran. There are no organized leaders. There are no church buildings. There are no unifying creeds. There are no seminaries or Bible schools. They sing in whispers. They meet in house churches from 8-12 in attendance then they split for evangelism and security reasons. Over 1 million Scriptures have been distributed since 2003. This is Iran where it is illegal to be a Christian. Around 120,000 people are believed to have been executed since 1981 for their political or religious beliefs. Hear one Christian's testimony reflecting their outlook on their situation from the documentary, *Sheep Among Wolves, Vols. I and II*: "Persecution is part of the Christian life so it is my honor to experience that. First God and second the people who are going to hell makes it worth it. Jesus told us that He sends us as lambs among wolves. We know that if they get us, the first thing they will do to me as a woman is to r_ _ _ (abuse) us and then they will beat us and ultimately will kill us. This is the decision we have made—**that we want to offer our bodies as a sacrifice** because I have this thought when I wake up that when I leave that door I might not come back. I've talked to my husband and we have made an agreement that this is the decision of our lives. We accept the consequences of what happens." Wow; that's poignant, powerful, and convicting! Their commitment begs the question: **Am I ashamed of the gospel?** Jesus tells us to beware when all people speak well of us (Lu. 6:26). Paul reminds us that all the godly will suffer persecution (2 Tim. 3:12).

Let's choose Jesus this week. How can I choose Jesus this week?

Choose to receive Christ today Who alone can save.

Choose to follow Jesus in baptism openly identifying yourself with Him.

Choose to begin each day with Jesus Who said, "I have chosen you."

Choose to follow Jesus throughout the day Who has the authority over what you think, where you go, the attitudes you have, and the things you do. We have a word for it: Lordship.

Choose to join FBC—a place where Jesus rules and where you can be equipped to make Christlike choices.

Choose to be here every Sunday worshipping our Lord Jesus in freedom hearing a word from God and fellowshiping with God's people carrying you through the week.

Choose to say a good word about Jesus as opportunity presents itself this week. When was the last time you had a spiritual conversation?

Jesus is the great divider. We want the mild Jesus, the comfortable Jesus, the "cross in my pocket" Jesus, the Jesus of the health, wealth, and success, the smiling Santa Claus Jesus, the loving Jesus who brings peace. But He never brought peace to the crowd; He only brings peace to His followers.

There was peace in Nazareth until Jesus said a prophet is not accepted in His own country then they tried to throw Him off the cliff. There was peace after the feeding of the 5000 until Jesus said that He was the bread of life from heaven and many turned away. There was peace in the Jerusalem Temple until He turned over their tables, then they conspired against Him. There was peace among the Pharisees until He called them a brood of vipers, then they determined to kill Him. There was peace on the Sabbath until Jesus intentionally broke it publicly to declare that the Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath, and then they rose up against Him. There was peace among the religious leaders until Jesus sat down with sinners and associated with women—even those of ill repute, then they determined He had to go. There was peace in Bethany

until Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead which was the final nail in His coffin beginning the last week of His life.

Jesus came to divide and separate. He separated the bad fish from the good fish, light from darkness, sheep from goats, wheat from tares, truth from deception and righteousness from religion. Jesus divides before He unifies; He tears down before He builds up; He plows up the hard outer ground of our rebellion before He sows the seed.³

Jesus divides us from the inside as well as externally. In Hebrews 4:12, the word of God divides (there's that word again) soul and spirit. He came also to separate flesh from spirit. He came to deal with the cognitive dissonance within us—that mental noise or internal conflict between our beliefs and our behavior. He came to root out the carnal because a double minded man is unstable in all his ways. He came to deal with our internal conflicts that bind us up and keep us from freedom. Jesus as the word of God separates flesh from spirit then slays the fleshly demons of our own making. In the words of the Old Testament prophet, he circumcises our hearts with the scalpel of His Spirit and word. He divides and cuts away those parts of ourselves that are not God honoring—our thoughts and attitudes; our words and actions; and our relationships and possessions. He does an inside job first so that He can use us on the outside to ensure that we are on the right side of the great divide.

We end where we began with the acknowledgement that one cannot be neutral about Jesus. We may speak politely about Him. We even speak fondly of Him at Christmas and Easter. But the truth that we must face is that we cannot just casually brush aside His claims, treat Him as if there is nothing to really get that upset about!

So, let me ask you. What have you decided about Jesus? This week's assignment is simple: I choose Jesus. Choose Jesus; your eternal and abundant life depends on it.

¹ Some thoughts take from: <https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/christ-the-great-divider-john-hamby-sermon-on-apologetics-jesus-107718?page=3&wc=800>

²<https://www.consumerreports.org/cro/magazine/2014/03/too-many-product-choices-in-supermarkets/index.htm>

³Some thoughts from the last paragraphs from: <https://fbcspur.org/jesus-the-divider-john-740-53/>