

OPTIONS UNLIMITED: When Choosing Becomes Losing

Theme: To be followers of Jesus in the Western suburbs of Chicago means to intentionally limit our options and live beneath our means.

Text: Luke 9:57-62

Introduction:

We Americans love choices. We are into designer everything. Mix and match. Express our individuality. Keep our own counsel. That is what makes an American an American. There is no better expression of this than what happens at Starbucks every day of the year. Designer coffee. I hold in my hand an exhibit borrowed from one of my fellow staff members, with her permission, of course, whose name shall go anonymous, but her initials are "S. A."

You will observe that there are considerable number of notations on this cup. N, EZ FM, N Whip, X-ht, PSL. This means that she ordered a *"Tall, non-fat, no-foam, No whip cream, extra-hot, Pumpkin Spice Latte"*. Now this is a person who knows precisely what she wants.

I used to be a more frequent contributor to the Starbucks Empire than I currently am. I recall standing in line hearing the string of adjectives that defined the precise taste of the one in front, as I was about to order my boring Grande coffee of the day. I thought to myself, how does one get to speak with the precision of these coffee hounds? Then I came up with my handle—the precise drink that I wanted. I rehearsed this as if I was preparing to deliver the Gettysburg address. The moment arrived: **"I will have double tall, sugarfree, one pump vanilla latte, please."** What a sense of triumph! I was now in the Starbucks club.

Yes, we love choices because is an expression of our freedom and individuality. But is there such a thing as too many choices? In our age of the god of maximum choice, as I call it, it is almost a sacrilege to even ask the question. I recently heard a missionary who was returning from a former Eastern block country say that his wife had recently gone grocery shopping for the first time since their return and had a miserable experience. Why? She was overwhelmed by the options. One of our members wrote a little piece on this subject entitled "Too Many Options". When you walk down the cereal aisle you are confronted with "Cocoa Puffs, Cocoa Comets, Cocoa Pebbles, Cocoa Krispies, Froot Loops, Fruity Pepples, Fruit and Frosted O's, Fruity Jems, Lucky Charms"...you get the idea. It would seem wise for grocery stores to hire cereal consultants to be stationed in the aisle. Which has the most fiber, sugar, protein, calories? How do you sort it out?

OPTIONS UNLIMITED: When Choosing Becomes Losing

Barry Schwartz has written a fascinating book entitled, *The Paradox of Choice*, with the telling subtitle: *Why More is Less*. He writes, "When people have no choice, life is almost unbearable. As the number of available choices increases, as it has in our consumer culture, the autonomy, control, and liberation this variety brings are powerful and positive. But as the number of choices keeps growing, negative aspects of having the multitude of options begin to appear. As the number of choices grows further, the negatives escalate until we become overloaded. At this point, choice no longer liberates, but debilitates. It might even be said to tyrannize." We have all experienced this: Whether it is our health plans, pensions plans, investment options, long distance carrier, electrical provider...we could spend our entire life trying to decide what is best and right for us and never be done. Overwhelmed.

For those who of us who are trying to be followers of Christ, how does this impact us? What are the pitfalls? Freedom and material well being can be a dangerous combination. If you live in the Western suburbs of Chicago that there is a good chance that we have unlimited options because of our family backgrounds, education and discretionary resources. When we have options, we can, as Schwartz has said, experience a sense of "autonomy, control and liberation." We don't even need to consult God on how we use the resources that we have. I could easily demonstrate to you that when we put freedom, comfort, and our sinful nature together we will generally make self-consuming choices as consumers.

Do you know that TV commercial where the man is showing off all that he has? He is standing by his kidney shaped swimming pool against the back drop of his stylish home and manicured yard; he drives the largest SUV that the road can handle; shift to the scene of his golf cart next to the green where he has a membership in the local country club; then he takes he family off to a Cancun vacation. The commercial closes with the question: "And how do I do it? I am in debt up to my eye balls." The irony is that we can so indulge our desires that we become a slave to them. In our exercise of choice, we often get trapped into maintaining a lifestyle to which we have become accustomed.

Another challenge I see with unlimited options is the temptation for parents to make sure their children are availed of all the options. Our thought is...if they are going to have a leg up, they must engage in the sport of the season, and maybe on more that one team at a time; of course, music lessons is a part of the regimen; and finally, a language course will round out the development in addition to the load of homework that is required. None of these is wrong in themselves, except that they get us going at a pace of life so that everything becomes equally important and in so doing we lose sense of priorities. We don't have time to pause and say, "Are we doing the right things, rather than everything?" This is particularly important to Christian parents, if the

OPTIONS UNLIMITED: When Choosing Becomes Losing

primary goal of parenting is to bring our children to the place where they are first and foremost are followers of Jesus Christ, as the primary vocation of their lives. How does all the activity support this call? Or does it, in fact, say that church, youth group, family devotions, are just one of many options on the plate?

In a society of over-choice, Schwartz makes some very interesting observations around happiness and choice. He writes, "What seems to be the most important factor in providing happiness is close social relations. People who are married, who have good friends, and who are close to their families are happier than those who are not. People who participate in religious communities are happier than those who do not." He notes that if these are key factors to happiness that they, in fact, decrease freedom, choice, and autonomy. Marriage is a commitment to one person. Friendship imposes a lasting hold on us. Religious communities have expectations as to how people should live.

What if the fulfilled life, is actually making choices to reduce our options and live beneath our means? That is what I propose this morning in the context of options unlimited: Christian Discipleship means to intentionally reduce our options and live beneath our means. Freedom biblically is not just to have choices, but it is to make the right choice to attach ourselves to the only One who can truly liberate us from ourselves.

In our Scripture text this morning we are going to meet a tough Jesus. In contrast to our options unlimited society we run into a Jesus who reduces our options to Himself and tells us that is the way to freedom.

Read Luke 9:57-62

In this text we encounter three disciples who have their own way of deflecting Jesus' call and His claim upon their lives. Unfortunately, we will see some of our self in Jesus' blunt interchange.

I. The Flattering Disciple (Luke 9:57-58)

The first would-be disciple takes the initiative and in flattering terms states his desire to be a follower of Jesus. "As they were walking along the road, a man said to him, 'I will follow you wherever you go.'" (Luke 9:57).

Who knows how this man might have expected Jesus to respond to his statement of total loyalty. Perhaps he expects a kind of "aw shucks" from Jesus. He might have anticipated that his flattery would lead to a moment of self-indulgence on Jesus' part, "I am flattered that you see me as One worthy of giving your whole life to. Could you please write up your decision in 300 words

OPTIONS UNLIMITED: When Choosing Becomes Losing

or less so that I can include your testimony in my monthly newsletter to my supporters? "

In reality, Jesus' reply seems rather rude. Jesus immediately turns to the price this person will have to pay if he is going to follow Jesus around. "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of man has no place to lay his head." (Luke 9:58) Jesus is saying, the animals have places to call home, but I have no permanent place to stay. Jesus heightens the tension by referring to himself as the Son of Man. He doesn't say, "I have no place to lay my head...but the **Son of Man** has no place to lay His head..." The phrase **Son of Man** is Jesus most common self-description. We tend to think that Jesus is contrasting Son of Man to the phrase Son of God. We say that Son of God refers to Jesus' divinity and Son of Man refers to his humanity. Son of Man, though, is a title that indicates that he comes from heavenly origin and has the right to dominion, power and glory over all people, nations and languages. The title comes from Daniel 7:13, when Daniel has a vision of "one like the Son of Man" who descends from the heaven. So Jesus is saying here, "I who am from above have no throne on earth from which to rule and no royal bed chamber in which to sleep. The foxes have their lair, and the birds have their roost, but if you follow me I have no idea tonight where I am going to rest. Welcome to my life."

What does this mean for us? Those who follow Christ should see themselves as exiles, sojourners, aliens, or strangers, on this planet. As the old song says, "This world is not my home, I'm just a passin' through." To the extent that we simply settle in and enjoy the good life from all the smorgasboard of options from which we can graze, then we have missed the point of following Jesus.

C. S. Lewis in his ingenious little book *Screwtape Letters*, has Screwtape, a higher echelon demon writing to his nephew, Wormwood, who has been assigned to scuttle the faith of a new believer. All the advice is from the devil's perspective. "Prosperity knits a man to this World. He feels that he is 'finding his place in it', when it is finding its place in him. His increasing reputation, his widening circle of acquaintances, his sense of self importance, the growing pressure of absorbing and agreeable work, build up in him a sense of being really at home on earth, which is just what we want."

I believe Jesus is saying to this would-be disciple, I am going to acquaint with the pain of this world. If you hang out with me, your life will rub up against those who are scraping to get by, because those are the kind of people I hang out with. The danger of life in the suburbs is that we can surround ourselves with all the latest comforts, make our homes those places of where we are insulated from the pain and brokenness of this world. After all we move here because the crime rate is low, the schools are good, it is a quiet and peaceable

OPTIONS UNLIMITED: When Choosing Becomes Losing

environment. But before we know it our spirits have shut down and we have said, "I don't want to be bothered or disturbed by the messiness or brokenness of poverty, or those who are at a different end of the spectrum of opportunity. I have got mine; I am OK. What a wonderful life."

Jesus' says, "No, the good life is following me into those broken places and entering into the pain of humanity. That is where I am." The flattering disciple is not indulged, but is called to limit his options and live beneath his means.

II. The Future Disciple (Luke 9:59-60)

With the second disciple, it is Jesus who initiates the contact, "[Jesus] said to another man, "Follow me." (Luke 9:59)

This disciple raises what would appear to be a legitimate concern as to why now is not the right time. "But the man replied, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.'" (Luke 9:59) On the surface, it would appear that the death of the man's father is either imminent or has just occurred. All I want is permission to carry out a family duty.

Jesus' response seems almost cruel. "Jesus said to him, "Let the dead bury their own dead, but you go and proclaim the Kingdom of God." (Luke 9:60). We might be thinking, "Come on, Jesus, the man simply wants to fulfill a family obligation and pay his respects to a beloved father!"

But what is actually going on here is hidden from our eyes because we do not understand that this is a common cultural idiom. For the man to say, "Let me go and bury my father", actually means let me remain at home until my father dies and then at some later time when the circumstances are right I will come and follow you. For example, if a son in a Middle Eastern family were contemplating relocating apart from the family, it would precipitate the question, "Are you not going to bury your father first?" The late Scottish biblical commentator William Barclay recounts the story of a brilliant young Arab who was offered a scholarship at both Cambridge and Oxford. His response was, "I will take it after I bury my father."

This is the future disciple. Some time in the future when the circumstances are right, I'll follow you then Lord. When the kids are grown, when the pressure of work subsides, then I will make time for those daily disciplines of prayer and bible study. "Any day now...", I will reorder my priorities, I will rise up earlier in the morning to spend time with you, I will make time for a small group, I will get home in time so that we can have that dinner table time with the family, I will get to my kids activities...And the time slips

OPTIONS UNLIMITED: When Choosing Becomes Losing

away while the regrets mount. We seem driven by some unseen pressure and it feels like we have no control over our lives; we are victims of the company expectations or self-imposed desires; we can't get off this pace, we are trapped. But some time in the future...it will not always be like this we say.

But Jesus is saying to us through this disciple of future faith, now is the only time you have. Pay attention to what is important, limit your options and live beneath your means. You don't need to have it all nor be driven by what the world promises to be the good life.

III. The Fake Disciple (Luke 9:61-62)

This last vignette assumes that Jesus has issued the same call as to the future disciple, "Follow me." This one has a different reason for delay and it sounds as legitimate as the one wanting to bury his father. "Still another said, 'I will follow you, Lord; but first let me go back and say good-by to my family'" (Luke 9:61). Sounds like a reasonable request to me. "Lord, before I drop everything and start charging around the Palestinian countryside, let me inform my family so that they don't worry about me. Let me say my good-bys." What's wrong with that?

But again there is more going on here than meets the eye. The phrase translated "say good-by" would be better translated "let me take leave of my family." The Old Syrian translation captures the Middle Eastern nuance, "Let me first go and explain my case to those at home." The one who is "taking leave" must ask permission to leave from the family, especially the patriarch, the father. So this disciple wants to go back to his family, not to report his decision to leave, but to ask permission if he is allowed. Of course he knows his father will say, "No." His first and primary loyalty is to his family.

This disciple will be able to legitimately say, "I really want to follow you; if it were up to me...you know I would be right there. But what can I do...I can't go against my family." So the issue presented to this disciple is one of authority. Jesus claims absolute authority even over this man's family.

Talk about reducing your options and living beneath your means. Jesus is saying, "It is to beat of my drum that you will live. I will have no rival authorities." Where do we clash with competing authorities in our lives? Is it the claim of our workplace on our lives? For many, this will be the exact crunch we face. The job offer comes. We have dangled before us the promotion, but it means moving to another location. Disruption of the family. But if I don't take it, I am a marked person. My future is over with this company. What do I do? These are tough places. This is where we need the support and discernment of the Christian community. The Lordship of Christ presents us with tough choices

OPTIONS UNLIMITED: When Choosing Becomes Losing

in our finances, our time, our commitments to service, our ethical decisions, our relationships, etc.

Jesus is saying to us through these vignettes—the flattering disciple, the future disciple and the fake disciple--don't be fooled, true freedom is not keeping all of unlimited options open and grazing from the buffet of all this self-indulgent opportunities, true freedom is reducing your options to a single one—following Jesus as your focal point.

How can we combat this culture of unlimited options? Let me offer you three practical ways as to how draw our life into focus as followers of Christ by intentionally limiting our options and living beneath our means.

1. Tithe: If we want to start living beneath your means and to limit your options, bring our finances in order by giving to the Lord off the top 10% of our income. If we are tempted to use our resources for scintillating electronic devises, entertainment systems, latest model car, the optional addition on to our home, then reduce our spendable income by giving it away.

C. S. Lewis has offered the best guideline I have ever read when it comes to the challenge of our giving, *“I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare. In other words, if our expenditures on comforts, luxuries, amusements, etc. is up to the standard common among those with the same income as our own, we are probably giving away too little. If our charities do not at all pinch or hamper us, I should say they are too small. There ought to be things we should like to do and cannot do because our charitable expenditure excludes them.”* But the wonder of it all will be that after you have practiced this awhile, our appetites change. The joy gets focused on how we can use our resources to lift up others, rather than to be spent on our desires.

2. Practice Sabbath: We have so lost the observance of a day each week of rest, that it almost seems antiquated and legalistic to be talking about keeping the Sabbath. Didn't they used to do that a 100 years ago and it was dreary? It was all about what you couldn't do? Reduced to life squelching legalism. We need to recapture Sabbath from the negativism of an age gone by. Why is this so important? What is there about taking a day a week to disconnect from our work routine to center it on the Lord and do those things with those you love that revive the soul? We need to put our life regularly in the context of the eternal, and recognize that we are designed to need the refreshment through the break in our routine. If you want to get in touch with what drives you, stop long enough to listen to your heart. Once a week get off that treadmill.

OPTIONS UNLIMITED: When Choosing Becomes Losing

William Wilberforce, a Christian member of the British Parliament in the late 1700's and 1800's is credited as the man who led the charge to rid the British Empire of slavery. But there was a time when he was tempted to set aside this call for the lure of ambition. In 1801, some years before the anti-slavery measure was passed, Wilberforce's political party came into power and the new prime minister was forming a cabinet. It was a critical time in England's history—Napoleon was raging across Europe and the key issue was peace. Wilberforce was rumored to be among the candidates the prime minister was seeking for an important post and Wilberforce was anxious to have it. One of Wilberforce's biographers captures this moment: "It did not take long for Wilberforce to become preoccupied with the possibility of the appointment. For days it grabbed at his conscious mind, forcing aside everything else. By his own admission, he had 'risings of ambition' and it was crippling his soul."

But Wilberforce kept the Sabbath as a weekly routine. Wilberforce's journal during this time reveals the power of that discipline: "Blessed be to God for the day of rest and religious occupation wherein earthly things assume their true size. Ambition is stunted."

Many of us could not imagine taking a full day each week for rest, reflection, doing those things that give life rather than drain it. We might need to start with a night a week as work free zone. Perhaps it is disconnecting for a period of time electronically. I mentioned Monday night at our inSanity group that Friday is my Sabbath and I put on an "out of office reply" on my computer that I don't do emails on Friday. One person in our group reacted as if to say, "You can do that. I don't have to be a slave to my Blackberry? I actually can have control over my life." One of the benefits of Sabbath Wilberforce found is that it starts to simplify your desires and allows you to find joy in simplicity.

3. My final suggestion to combat the options unlimited world is for individuals and families to engage in a **ministry of compassion**. Be involved with people that take us out of the normal world in which we live. Al Hsu's book *The Suburban Christian*, makes this compelling observation, "A child growing up in such a homogenous environment (as is the suburbs) is less likely to develop a sense of empathy for people from other walks of life and is ill prepared to live in a diverse society. The more homogeneous and safe the environment, the less understanding there is of all that is different, and the less concern for the world beyond the subdivision walls." This is why it is so wonderful when we see families together at Project Serve sites. We provide summer mission opportunities for Middle, High School and College students. The GO teams expose our hearts to human need and redirect our resources in a compassionate manner.

OPTIONS UNLIMITED: When Choosing Becomes Losing

So how do we limit our options and live beneath our means: tithe, practice Sabbath, engage in a ministry of compassion.

I find it fascinating when secular research simply confirms what the Bible has said long ago. What makes for the happiest people? The happiest people have enduring commitments such as marriage, and friendship and have committed themselves to a spiritual community, which actually has standards for how we are to live. In other words, it is in choosing to limit our autonomy that we truly find life. Jesus called us to limit our choices to a singular focus when he said, "He who loses his life for my sake, shall find it."