

# "Simple, But Never Easy"

Text: Deuteronomy 30:15-20

1 Thessalonians 3:11-13 **"Now may our God and Father himself, and our Lord Jesus...make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all... so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints."** Amen.

Dear Fellow Christians, simple and easy are not synonyms. More often than not they are not the same thing at all. It's a *simple* command, for example, to tell someone to touch their ear with their elbow. Yet not only is that not easy, it's geometrically impossible.

Of all religions in the world, Christianity is at the same time the simplest and the hardest. It is simple in that the basic, fundamental principle of Christianity is that another – Jesus Christ – provided for mankind all that mankind needed to be saved. God has declared our sin debt to have been paid for us by his Son. Those who believe God's promise will go to heaven. Those who do not will be sentenced to hell.

Basic Christianity is, therefore, very simple. But is it easy? Yes and no. On the one hand it is easy in that the effort that had to be expended to save mankind has already been supplied in full by Jesus Christ. By raising Jesus from the dead on Easter Sunday, God the Father has declared his Son's payment to be full and complete. Since it is also God that produces in the individual the faith to believe this, quite literally everything that we need to be saved is supplied by our God. In that sense Christianity is also easy.

So why then could or would anyone claim that Christianity is also the hardest religion in the world? The answer might not be what you think.

So we turn, as always, to God's Word for answers. That part of God's Word that will guide and instruct us this morning is found in Deuteronomy Chapter 30:

*ESV Deuteronomy 30:15-20 "See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. <sup>16</sup> If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you today, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take*

*possession of it. <sup>17</sup> But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, <sup>18</sup> I declare to you today, that you shall surely perish. You shall not live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess. <sup>19</sup> I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, <sup>20</sup> loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them."*

This is the Word of God. Here God himself has spoken to us. Our job is to listen – really listen – and learn, for here God offers us a wealth of infallible truth and wisdom, protection and life eternal. We prepare to give these truths our undivided attention and to receive great things from our God as we pray: **"Sanctify us in the truth, O Lord. Your Word is truth."** Amen.

The basic truths of Christianity are certainly anything but difficult or complex. Little children can explain them - sometimes better than adults. How then can it also be the most difficult of all religions?

First, because you and I are incapable of truly understanding and believing what the Bible tells us about how we are saved *unless and until God the Holy Spirit works the miracle of faith in our hearts*. That means that while the bare facts are simple enough, no human being can come to accept those facts as true apart from the miraculous intervention of God himself, for **"no man can say 'Jesus is Lord' but by the Holy Spirit."** What this teaches us, among other things, is that the mere hearing of certain facts could never, in itself, convert and save. God had to do that for us; he had to work that miracle *in us*. It is therefore impossible for man to save himself – even if all he had to do was to make himself believe certain things that he was told.

John spoke of this phenomenon in his First Epistle. Referring to those who had only the *appearance* of Christianity he wrote: **"They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us. <sup>20</sup> But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge."** <sup>1</sup> John 2:19-20

What a sobering truth to realize that so many can be so close to the truth, and yet so far from salvation, and that we need to be rescued

by that which cannot even be seen. Here we begin to get a sense of why Christianity, in a sense, is not easy. Man has no power to provide it, no power to make it happen by his own will or actions.

So too when Scripture teaches us that the Holy Spirit "*calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian Church on earth and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith*" (as summarized in Luther's explanation of the Third Article) those who are so rescued must simply stand in awe at the merciful goodness of that Holy Spirit who lives within them. How humbling, again, to truly come to grips with the fact that God alone did for me that which I desperately needed to be done, but which I had no power whatsoever to do or provide for myself.

Christianity then is the most difficult of all religions because it can only be received as a gift from God; never earned, never apprehended or adopted by human thought, and certainly never deserved.

Yet there is more that makes Christianity so difficult. Unlike Christianity, unbelief, which is more or less the opposite of Christianity, thrives in large part because it has no natural predators.

The natural predators of Christianity, on the other hand, are literally everywhere, for they include the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh. You really can't avoid any of the three. Yet those same predators pose no threat to any form of unbelief. Why would they? Satan is perfectly content for all unbelievers to live full and happy lives, and to pass quietly into an eternity of unspeakable horror and torment. So too he will offer no resistance against that which only damns – that which only advances his unspeakably cruel cause. Some have been wondering aloud again of late just why a base, damning religion like Islam can prove so resilient and enjoy such growing, worldwide appeal. The fact is that just as any species of animal in the wild will tend to thrive in the absence of enemies or predators, so also in the area of religion. The devil will always rage against Christianity, but he will just as surely promote every other false and damning religion. Those then that believe that "any old religion will do" will naturally choose the path of least resistance – and that path is anything *but* Christianity. As Jesus himself put it, "**For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many.**"<sup>8</sup> (Matthew 7:13)

Our text for this morning brings us to the third reason Christianity is not easy, which as to do with the enemy within. Christians themselves have become quite skilled at both twisting the meaning of God's clear Word

and at throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Some explanation is obviously in order.

So to both illustrate and to prove the point, take another look at the opening verses of our text: "**See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil.**"<sup>16</sup> **If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you today, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you ...**"

This is part of Moses' farewell speech to Israel. What exactly is he saying to them? Maybe a better question is what is he *not* saying to them? This is where the confusion starts, and this is, in part, exactly why Christianity can be so simple and yet the enemies of Christianity can make it so complicated and difficult. An alarming number of "Bible experts" read this section as if Moses were laying out God's salvation plan for Israel. Moses continues: "**I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life.**"

You see the problem. If Moses is talking about saving faith, then he is clearly teaching not only decision theology (that man can and must, in effect, bring himself to faith by "choosing life") but also pure work-righteousness. How then could what the Apostle Paul said centuries later in Ephesians 2:8-9 also be true: "**For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast**"?

There is, of course, no contradiction here, but this is exactly why God wants us to study our Bibles so carefully and so faithfully. Man and devil are consummate liars – grandmasters at perverting and twisting that which is so clear and simple. The result is that many just give up, assuming that the Bible contradicts itself and that therefore there really is no one "right religion" for all have truth and all have error. Assuming that to be true, the preferred route that man will always naturally choose is, again, the path of least resistance – and the devil resists only Christianity.

The simple resolution here is that Moses isn't talking about salvation; he's talking about the survival of God's "favored nation status" for the Jews as they stood at the border of the Promised Land. The text and the context here make clear that Moses is talking not about the one-sided covenant that God established with mankind when he promised

to simply forgive their sins, freely, for Jesus' sake. He's talking about the two-sided covenant that he established with Israel as a nation. That covenant had two parts, neither of which had anything at all to do with what man must do *to gain heaven*. The first part of the covenant described in our text was that Israel would have to honor the one true God alone and struggle to keep his commandments. That was Israel's obligation. The other half of the covenant was that God would respond by showering the Jews with every sort of temporal blessing in the land they were about to enter. The second part was contingent on the first. This becomes obvious when we read Moses' words carefully: "...**Then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it.**<sup>17</sup> **But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them,** <sup>18</sup> **I declare to you today, that you shall surely perish. You shall not live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess... Therefore choose life... that you may dwell in the land that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them.**" Note well – nothing whatsoever about heaven or eternal life. What God was offering to the Jews was temporal peace, security, and prosperity.

We know from history that the Jews could not even keep their part of this simple covenant – let alone live lives free from all sin and thereby earn heaven. That's exactly why God established the New Covenant of forgiveness through faith in the goodness of Jesus Christ. Man would not, could not, keep even a simple covenant where they would honor only one God and not give themselves over to sin, so God established that sublime one-sided covenant where he did it all for us. All by himself.

Yet here is where Christians tend to throw the baby out with the bathwater by simply ignoring these words from our God because they do not tell us how we can save ourselves. While it is true that we can neither save ourselves nor choose to be saved, the choices that we can and do make in life most certainly carry consequences. No one can cling to sin and have any expectation that their faith will not be diminished or eventually destroyed. Sin is a cancer that must be excised. Prolonged disobedience – including the despising of the means of grace – is a terrible choice that mankind *can* make. We *cannot* therefore bring ourselves to faith, but we *can* bring ourselves to ruin. We have the power – the terrible, terrifying power – to forfeit the eternal life that Jesus earned for us.

Let your old Adam then hear well the words of our text, for it is the only language it understands. Recognize again this morning the profound

danger of allowing any sin to establish lodging in your heart. You alone, by the power of the Holy Spirit living in you, can identify the attacks of sin and Satan in your own personal walk. Do not, in other words, simply dismiss God's Law, as did the Jews. But then, when you do struggle against sin, as you and I and every Christian always will, then look to the cross and thrill again to God's promise that Jesus Christ has paid also for your own personal sins. Marvell, and glorify God for the forgiveness that is yours in Christ Jesus. Amen.

ESV **Isaiah 58:3-9a** 'Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?' Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers. <sup>4</sup> Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist. Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be heard on high. <sup>5</sup> Is such the fast that I choose, a day for a person to humble himself? Is it to bow down his head like a reed, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Will you call this a fast, and a day acceptable to the LORD? <sup>6</sup> "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? <sup>7</sup> Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? <sup>8</sup> Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard. <sup>9</sup> Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry, and he will say, 'Here I am.'

ESV **Matthew 5:13-20** "You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. <sup>14</sup> ¶ "You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. <sup>15</sup> Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. <sup>16</sup> In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven. <sup>17</sup> ¶ "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. <sup>18</sup> For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. <sup>19</sup> Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. <sup>20</sup> For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

ESV **Deuteronomy 30:15-20** "See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. <sup>16</sup> If you obey the commandments of the LORD your God that I command you today, by loving the LORD your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. <sup>17</sup> But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, <sup>18</sup> I declare to you today, that you shall surely perish. You shall not live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess. <sup>19</sup> I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, <sup>20</sup> loving the LORD your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the LORD swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them."



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**Michael Roehl, Pastor**

**The 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Epiphany – February 8, 2026**

### **The Opening Prayer by the Pastor**

### **The Opening Hymn – 414**

"Come Let Us Join Our Cheerful Songs"

### **The Order of Service – Hymnal page 31ff.**

### **The Scripture Lessons:** *(Printed on the back page of this bulletin)*

**The First Lesson:** (Isaiah 58:3-9) In the first part of this reading, Isaiah addresses a question or objection raised by the superficial Jews of his day. They were outwardly practicing the prescribed fasts, and they complained that God was not adequately rewarding them. Isaiah here identifies the problem, which was a heart condition. They were doing the right thing for the wrong reasons. The message for us today is that we continually need to reevaluate our actions, and especially the motivation for those actions.

### **Psalm 84 (Hymnal page 84)**

**The Second Lesson:** (Matthew 5:13-20) Our Gospel lesson is a continuation of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. While the law element in the sermon was intended to crush mankind's natural tendency toward work righteousness (and to recognize the need for a Savior) the Christian also now uses what Jesus here taught us as an infallible guide for our actions going forward. The works of a Christian are a thank you for the gift already received, not an attempt to pay for our sins.

### **The Confession of Faith -**

The Nicene Creed *(Projected on Screens)*

### **The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 157 (Stanzas 1-2)**

"We Praise You and Acknowledge You"

### **The Sermon – Text: Deuteronomy 30:15-20 *(See back page)***

**"Simple, But Never Easy"**

### **The Offertory – (Projected on Screens)**

### **The Post-Sermon Hymn – 157 (Stanzas 3-4)**

"We Praise You and Acknowledge You"

### **The Prayers of the Day, Followed by the Lord's Prayer**

### **The Preparation for Holy Communion *(Hymnal page 38)***

### **The Distribution**

### **The Nunc Dimittis and Thanksgiving** *(Hymnal page 41)*

### **The Benediction**

### **The Closing Hymn – 147 (Stanzas 1 & 4)**

"God, We Praise You"

### **Silent Prayer**

**Welcome!** - We warmly welcome any visitors who might be with us this morning and invite you to join us every Sunday at this time.

**A note on Communion:** It is a matter of conscience among us, drawn from God's Word, that communing together is an intimate expression of confessional fellowship based on shared beliefs. We therefore ask those who have not publicly declared their unity of faith with us to first meet with the pastor for the information you would need and want before communing. Please understand that we seek only to follow the Word and will of God and are in no way judging your Christian faith.

### **Attendance – Sunday (43) Average (38)**

#### **This Week at St. Paul:**

Today	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday school or Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service with Holy Communion
	-11:15 a.m.	– Fellowship Hour
Wednesday	- No Midweek Bible Study	
Next Sunday	- No Sunday School or Bible Class	
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Fellowship Hour

**CLC News** – Pastor Aaron Ude is considering the call to Holy Cross of Phoenix. Pastor Jonah Albrecht has returned the call to Messiah of Eau Claire. That congregation then called Pastor Timothy Daub, who has also returned their call. Pastor Johnathan Schnose has returned the call to Trinity of Spokane. Pastor Paul Agenten has returned the call to Living Hope of Appleton, WI.

**Pastor Out of Town** – Pastor Roehl is scheduled to be out of town from Monday through Saturday of this week. As a result, there will be **no midweek Bible Study** on Wednesday and **no Bible Class or Sunday school next Sunday**. The Sunday Worship Service will be held at the regular time – 10:00 am.

**Lenten Season** – A reminder that the season of Lent begins with our Ash Wednesday service on February 18<sup>th</sup> at 7:00 pm and continues through Easter. All are encouraged to make every effort to share in the blessings of these special midweek services.

**Care Package** – This morning is the deadline to contribute to a care package being prepared for our lone out-of-town student, Aidan Pfennig.