

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Healthy Choices

Isaiah 55:1-7

Today's text from Isaiah begins with a summons, an invitation. Come. Come to the banquet. Come and quench your thirst. Come and satisfy your hunger. And the best news of all, it's free! What better news could there be, especially during these days when the price of everything seems to be going up. Though you may also be asking how far you have to travel to get to this feast, considering the price of a gallon of gas. Will the fact that there's no charge for the food compensate for what you're spending on transportation? This invitation to dinner seems to be getting more complicated.

And considering the number of product options to which we've grown accustomed, other questions may arise about this banquet. If water is being served, is it from the tap, or bottled? If it's bottled, is it spring water or purified water? And if it's purified, what filtration process was used? As for the wine on the menu, is it red or white? After all, certain wines pair better with certain types of food. And let's not forget the milk that's mentioned in the invitation. Is it whole milk or low fat? Will soy milk or oat milk or almond milk be among the options?

These are the kinds of questions that choosy shoppers like us increasingly ask. We're more informed about what goes into our food and beverages. We're more aware of our dietary needs. We're more likely to read the nutrition label when we pull an item from the grocery store shelf. When we host a meal, we're more open to the possibility that it might need to include vegan, gluten-free, or sugar free options. And that's really the key word, options. When it comes to pulling up a chair at the table, we like options.

Of course, more options can also mean more choices, which can mean more stress. When it comes to product selection, simpler can often be better. If you've ever been to an Aldi grocery store, you've probably noticed that it's a more stripped-down shopping experience than many of the traditional supermarkets. Fewer, but usually wider, aisles. Products often displayed in their original cardboard shipping boxes. And most of all, a more limited selection. A few years ago, one report noted that Aldi stocked around 1,400 items, compared to around 40,000 at most grocery stores and more than 100,000 at Walmart supercenters. As one shopper summarized the experience: "I'm a busy mom. I don't have time to navigate a huge grocery store with kids begging to get out and go home. I can get in and out of an Aldi in no time. I'm not sifting through 50 different varieties of salsa."¹

"Sifting through 50 different varieties of salsa." That statement pretty well captures the contemporary mood. Many of you have probably spent some time this past week standing there in the middle of the aisle, staring at the product selection, paralyzed by the number of options in front of you. Maybe not for salsa, but certainly for toothpaste or shampoo or cereal or lunch meat. Many times you take the simple approach and just get what you've always gotten. That helps manage the anxiety and reduce the stress that come with being modern American consumers.

Author Bill Bryson once highlighted some of the changes he noticed when he returned to America after spending 20 years overseas. He included this observation about shoppers in the United States:

Abundance of choice not only makes every transaction take ten times as long as it ought to, but in a strange way actually breeds dissatisfaction. The more there is, the more people crave, and the more they crave, the more they, well, crave more. You have a sense sometimes of being among millions and millions of people needing more and more of everything, constantly, infinitely, unquenchably.²

In today's text from Isaiah, the people are craving. Not because they have too much but because so many of them have too little. They're summoned to attend a gathering where there's abundance. This is the Lord's way of inviting his exiled people to uproot themselves and reclaim their ancestral home. Cyrus, the ruler of the Persian empire, has made allowance for them to return. But this doesn't mean they're coming back to a place where all is well. The city of Jerusalem hadn't been rebuilt. Social and economic structures were weak. There were tensions between those who were returning and those who had stayed in the land during the period of exile. Large portions of the population were impoverished. So this invitation to eat and drink without paying would have been incredibly welcome news to them.

But restoration didn't stop with just an abundance of physical nourishment. The invitation to feast is also an image of the spiritual richness of life in relationship with God. That is, the fullness of life as the people of God in the presence of God. "Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy?" (v. 2a). In other words, the "stuff" of life involves more than just what you can produce by your own labor and effort, your own striving. The word of the Lord is also foundational nutrition. "Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare" (v. 2b). The beginning of verse three then drives the point home even further. Being attentive to God, and receiving what God is saying, is what makes for abundance and aliveness.

For that to happen, we must answer the summons that gets repeated three times in the opening verse. "Come ... Come ... Come." This is an exhortation to choose, and to choose well. The fullness and richness of life in relationship with God involves choices.

Pastor John Ortberg cites a university researcher who once found that the average person makes about 70 decisions every day. That adds up to 25,500 decisions a year. Over the span of 70 years, that's 1,788,500 decisions. Ortberg then quotes philosopher Albert Camus who said, "Life is a sum of all your choices."³

I was also struck by the comments of a psychotherapist who specializes in treating those in the millennial generation. She acknowledges that she didn't intend it that way. They just came flocking to her practice. She notes how their struggles and problems tend to cluster around a dominant theme. They're essentially saying, "I have too many choices and I can't decide what to do. What if I make the wrong choice?"⁴

With choices comes stress, especially in a contemporary environment where, as I emphasized earlier, we're presented with so many options. We generally think of having more options as a positive thing. It supposedly gives us more latitude to determine the course and outcome of our lives. But at the same time, having more options can leave us feeling less in control and more under the power of unreasonable expectations. As one journalist has written, "The standard line is that choice is good for us, that it confers on us freedom, personal responsibility, self-determination, autonomy and lots of other things that

don't help when you're standing before a towering aisle of water bottles, paralyzed and increasingly dehydrated, unable to choose."⁵

Of course there are many other significant decisions we face in life that carry greater and more lasting significance than just which type of bottled water to purchase. Above all, the decision to commit your life to Christ and follow him as Lord and Savior. And within the lifelong experience of following him, all the significant points that set your life and its relationships on a particular path. Choices about school and work. Choices about whether to marry, and if so, whom. Choices about where to live. Choices about having children. Choices about whether, and when, to retire. I'm thinking of those stages of life decisions that call for such careful discernment.

And those daily, often moment by moment, choices that shape who we are and form the lives of others around us. How to spend your money. How to respond to a contentious coworker. How to discipline your child with love. Whether to follow your doctor's orders. Whether just to rest or try to get something else done. Whether to answer the call from that phone number you don't recognize. What route to take to work. What to fix for dinner. In so many ways, our daily lives, our very selves, are constituted by the collection of choices that we make.

And as you make these daily decisions, it's essential that you do so within the reality of God's kingdom, the sovereign love of God, revealed most of all through Jesus Christ. It's not as if you're making choices within a completely empty and open space, where you're free to determine what's reality and what's not. Every day, moment by moment, you and I operate within the reality of the reign of God. I like the way that pastor Tim Keller describes it when he says:

If you see a large sailboat out on the water moving swiftly, it is because the sailor is honoring the boat's design. If she tries to take it into water too shallow for it, the boat will be ruined. The sailor experiences the freedom of speed sailing only when she limits her boat to the proper depth of water and faces the wind at the proper angle.

In the same way, human beings thrive in certain environments and break down in others. Unless you honor the given limits of your physical nature, you will never know the freedom of health. Unless you honor the given limits of human relationships, you will never know the freedom of love and social peace. If you actually lived any way you wanted—never aligning your choices with these physical and social realities—you would quickly die, and die alone.

You are, then, not free to do whatever you choose ... You get the best freedoms only if you are willing to submit your choices to various realities, if you honor your own design.⁶

Isaiah is getting at something similar when he declares, "Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts. Let them turn to the Lord, and he will have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will freely pardon" (vv. 6-7). So we can think of making each day's choices as a matter of seeking God's ways and discerning how to live faithfully within the reality of God's kingdom. Turning away from sin and turning toward God, moment by moment, is the environment for our decisions.

Living in relationship with God, in the presence of God, is a kind of abundance that goes beyond human understanding. There's a richness in being the people of God that surpasses our ability to explain. It's like a feast, says Isaiah. So come. Each day, come. Each day, moment by moment, nourish yourself by listening for God. Learn how to crave his teachings. Consume his word. Drink his wisdom. And as you do so, you'll be able to make

healthy choices. Choices that are good for your soul. Choices that bring life to you and give life to others.

¹ Nathaneal Meyersohn, "How a cheap, brutally efficient grocery chain is upending America's supermarkets." CNN. May 17, 2019. <https://www.cnn.com/interactive/2019/05/business/aldi-walmart-low-food-prices/index.html#:~:text=Aldi%20only%20stocks%20about%201%2C400%20items%20compared%20to,labor%20%E2%80%94%20runners%20retrieve%20carts%2C%20cashiers%20ring%20up> (March 16, 2022).

² Bill Bryson, *I'm a Stranger Here Myself: Notes on Returning to American after Twenty Years Away* (New York: Broadway, 1999) 246.

³ John Ortberg, *All the Places to Go ... How Will You Know?: God Has Placed before You an Open Door. What Will You Do?* (Carol Stream: Tyndale House, 2015) 8.

⁴ Tess Bingham, "I've been a 'millennial therapist' for more than 5 years—and this is their No. 1 complaint." CBNC.com (July 2, 2019).

⁵ Stuart Jeffries, "Why Too Much Choice Is Stressing Us Out." *The Guardian* (November 21, 2015).

⁶ Timothy Keller, *Making Sense of God: An Invitation to the Skeptical* (New York: Viking, 2016) 103.