

CUTTING OUR LOSSES

Ruth 1:1-5

*THERE ARE ALWAYS SEVERE CONSEQUENCES TO
MAKING BAD CHOICES IN LIFE.
HOPEFULLY WE WILL COME TO OUR SENSES QUICKLY
ENOUGH TO CORRECT THESE*

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CUTTING OUR LOSSES

RUTH 1:1-5

A couple of years ago, I had quite a few shares of stock in Kmart. It started dropping in price weekly. I thought that I would be able to make more money by buying more stock in Kmart as the shares went down. That way, when the shares went up, I would be able to make more and more money. It sounded like a good idea until one day Kmart declared bankruptcy and all my shares of Kmart were worthless.

I should have cut my losses and sold off the stock as soon as it started to go down. However, greed often clouds our judgment.

In life, bad choices are like that. We start off on a sinful path that seems like a good idea at the time. When things start to go bad and we start to experience the consequences of our bad choice, instead of cutting our losses and getting back on track with God and good common sense, we try somehow to make the bad choice work out.

I'm reminded of a second-grade boy who was bumped while getting on the school bus and suffered a two-inch cut above his eye. At recess he collided with another boy and lost two teeth. After school, on the way home, he decided to slide on the ice. He lost his balance, fell down, and broke his wrist. At the hospital, while they were setting his wrist, his father noticed that he was clutching a quarter in his good hand. He looked at his father all excited and said, "Look dad, I found it on the ground when I fell. This is the first quarter I ever found. This sure is my lucky day."

And often times that's the way we are as adults. We make a bad choice, and as long as we have what we think we want, and even when all sorts of

bad things happen

and to us as a result, we somehow think it's all worth it and we go to plan b, c, and d to try and make our bad choice work out.

I'm hoping from this morning's sermon that we will see that when we realize we have made a bad choice, we should cut our losses as quickly as possible and get back on track with God and good common sense. Here is the main idea of this morning's sermon. **THERE ARE ALWAYS SEVERE CONSEQUENCES TO MAKING BAD CHOICES IN LIFE. HOPEFULLY WE WILL COME TO OUR SENSES QUICKLY ENOUGH TO CORRECT THESE.** In other words, once we come to our senses and understand that we have made a bad choice, we should stop and turn around. The longer we continue to hang on to the bad choice, the more consequences start to kick in. The quicker we give up the bad choice, the easier it is to break the cycle, and the easier it is to get back on track.

I. MAKING BAD CHOICES (VS 1-2)

*Since Our Natural Bent Is Towards
Rebelling Against God, We Often Find
Ourselves Making Bad Choices.*

I think that verses 1 and 2 demonstrate that making bad choices is part of who we are. In other words, **SINCE OUR NATURAL BENT IS TOWARDS REBELLING AGAINST GOD, WE OFTEN FIND OURSELVES MAKING BAD CHOICES.**

A. WE MAKE BAD CHOICES (1)

Verse 1 reminds us that we all make bad choices. We unpacked this verse some last week, but let me just tell you about the last recorded story

in the book of Judges. A Levite priest took a concubine for himself. It appears that it may have been against her will. After a time, she ran away. She went back to her father's house to live. By the way, her hometown was Bethlehem in Judah, the same place where the book of Ruth starts and finishes. The priest tracked her down to bring her back home. But on the way home, they stopped in Jerusalem to spend the night. Some ruffians surrounded the house where they were staying and demanded that the priest come out so that they could have sex with him. Instead, the priest threw out his concubine. The ruffians gang-banged her all night long and left her for dead. The priest then cut up the girl into 12 pieces and mailed a piece to each tribe. The nation was so appalled, that as one they came against the Benjamites. They killed many men and most of the women. And then they all took a vow not to let any of their daughters marry a Benjamite man. Now the tribe of Benjamin was in danger of being extinct. Israel could not let this happen since God ordained the 12 tribes. So in order to keep their vows and to maintain their pride, the other tribes suggested this solution. Each year they would have a festival. At the festival, the Benjamite men could hide in the bushes. As the girls danced and celebrated, the Benjamite men were allowed to kidnap, carry off, and marry girls.

Let me tell you one more story. There was a famine in the land and a man named Abraham left the land and traveled down to Egypt. This was not just any man. It was Abraham, the father of the Hebrew nation. In Egypt, he passed his wife off as his sister. Pharaoh fell in love with Sarah, took her into the palace, and probably had sex with her. Abraham became rich. But the cycle didn't end there. Abraham pulled this trick with his wife one more time and, interestingly enough, so did his son Isaac.

Now look at the last phrase of verse 1, "*went to live for a while in the country of Moab.*" The Hebrew word for "went to live for a while" is *gur*. This word is meant to be temporary. In other words, they went to Moab intending to stay for only a short time. They would be on a visitor's visa, not an immigration or permanent resident visa. They were there for

an extended vacation.

Add to all of this that in God's giving of the law to Israel , He said that famine would be one of the consequences should they choose to disobey Him and leave Him for other gods. And as we said, the nation of Moab was started through the incestuous relationship between Lot and his daughter.

In this first verse, by using the themes of "days when the judges ruled," "a famine," and "went to live for a while in the fields of Moab ," the author of Ruth wants us to know that this is a bad choice.

If we would stop and think about what's going on in our lives and if we are humble and honest enough to assess where we are, we could easily see that a lot of the mess we are in is due to our bad choices. And as we will see later, we will have to admit that our bad choices have affected many around us as well.

B. WHY DO WE MAKE BAD CHOICES? (2)

If we realize what a mess we often make out of our lives, then why do we continue to make bad choices? Hopefully verse 2 will shed some light on that. Again, let's look at some of the vocabulary. The husband's name is Elimelech and his wife's name is Naomi. They are Hebrew names. Elimelech means "God is my king." Naomi means, "Beautiful and pleasant." They are not only listed as being from the city of Bethlehem of Judah ; they are referred to as Ephrathites. This perhaps indicates that they were wealthy and maybe even aristocrats. At any rate, they appear to be living at a very high standard.

However, when God started to judge Israel for her sins by sending a famine, instead of staying, repenting, and trying to get the country back on track with God, Elimelech decided to ride out the famine by leaving. We can understand this, can't we? Elimelech was standing out on his front porch, watching the crops burn up. From his front porch he could see past the Dead Sea , over to Moab . The hills in Moab were green and

lush. He had plenty of money to travel there with his family to ride out the famine.

It is hard for us to understand this as a bad choice because we don't live in a theocracy where God is the king. What Elimelech was doing was trying to avoid the discipline of God. He was trying to take the easy way out. Elimelech valued worldly comforts and riches more than he valued God. And that is interesting since his name means *God is my king*.

But is Elimelech so different from us? We have become so attached to this world that we often make choices based on our desires rather than first seeking to serve and please God. Here is the way I think we approach life. We first let the world and culture define for us what is good and desirable. For example, we think being successful and making money is desirable. Then we try to justify it religiously. Men and women become workaholics. And they justify it like this. They say, "We are working to provide for our children. We want them to have all the best of everything. God wants us to provide for our families." Can you see how perverted that is?

Let's take another example. Our culture says that if you are not in a relationship, then you are not desirable. Men and women then get in all sorts of unhealthy relationships that are not godly from the very beginning, and then try to justify all sorts of immoral and unhealthy behaviors and decisions to remain in them. I have seen women beaten and abused. And yet, they would refuse to leave these abusive men. They would say things like, "The bible says that God hates divorce" and "God wants me to forgive."

Men put up with unfaithful wives with the same sort of religious justification. As long as we let the world, our friends, society and our families define what's valuable in life, we are going to constantly make bad decisions.

Look, I understand the decision making process. The grass always looks

greener on the other side. Just like Elimelech looked across the Dead Sea to the green plains of Moab , we look at what everybody else has. She has a boyfriend. He has a wife. They have a house. He has a good job.

But what Elimelech forgot and what we forget is that we have God. And God wants us to remember that He is all we need. We, like Elimelech, get mesmerized by the glitz and the glamour of this world. We want to be well thought of in our cultures. And keep this in mind. We are very good at justifying what we are doing and putting a religious twist on it. We would do well to continually think about the things we are proud about and the things we think are good and desirable. Then we need to ask if this is what God thinks or if this is what we have come to value in the world and our culture, and then tried to make it what God thinks.

Here is the danger. Look at the last sentence in verse 2. It says, "And they went to Moab and lived there." This word is a form of the verb "to be." They started out with a visitor's visa and now they have applied for permanent residence. They were now comfortable with their lifestyle. However, they were not on the land God gave them. They were in a foreign land. The names of their sons already indicate that they may have been more worldly than godly. The names of their sons were Mahlon and Kilion. They don't appear to be Hebrew names. They appear to be Canaanite names from the land. Mahlon means *weak* or *sickly* and Kilion means *failing* or *disaster*. Oftentimes Hebrews named their children according to what they were presently experiencing in their lives. Perhaps the famine and hard times were getting to Elimelech. Whatever the case, Elimelech left behind the land God gave him through his ancestors and he left for Moab . We are also reminded that the Hebrews often wanted to quit moving towards the Promised Land when things got tough. They wanted to go back to the slavery of Egypt .

We make bad choices when we fill our minds with the things and expectations of this world. When I hear men say things like, "My wife doesn't do this or that, or so and so's wife does this or that," I know it's not long before this guy is headed for an affair.

Let's solve the problem like this. Let's start with this. Let's love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. Then let's love others as we love ourselves. That won't leave us with much time or energy to spend on thinking about worldly things.

The author of Ruth has given us all sorts of clues in these first two verses that all is not well and that this family has made a very bad choice.

How about us? I know that we have all made some bad decisions in the past, but are we continuing to make bad decisions? First of all, we shouldn't be surprised, because **SINCE OUR NATURAL BENT IS TOWARDS REBELLING AGAINST GOD, WE OFTEN FIND OURSELVES MAKING BAD CHOICES.**

II. LIVING WITH THE CONSEQUENCES OF BAD CHOICES (VS 3-5)

***Making Bad Choices Doesn't Only Affect
The One Who Makes The Bad Choice.
One Bad Choice Sets Off A Whole Series Of
Bad Chain Reactions.***

But secondly, we need to stop what we are doing immediately because as verses 3-5 point out, living with the consequences of bad choices can be devastating. In fact, **MAKING BAD CHOICES DOESN'T ONLY AFFECT THE ONE WHO MAKES THE BAD CHOICE. ONE BAD CHOICE SETS OFF A WHOLE SERIES OF BAD CHAIN REACTIONS.**

A. BAD CHOICES LEAD TO BAD LUCK (3)

My friends continually chastise me when I talk about luck. But I think verse 3 illustrates the point that bad choices can lead to bad luck. We don't know what the time frame was, but it seems as if a lot of time is compressed into these first 5 verses ... perhaps as many as 20 years.

Verse 3 starts out, "Now Elimelech, Naomi's husband died." Perhaps he died of natural causes. Perhaps he died by chance; perhaps it was just bad luck, or maybe even combination of all of the above. Let's not forget that even though God's name is not mentioned yet, this could also be a punishment. No matter what the cause, we must acknowledge that God is sovereign and Elimelech did not die outside of God's sovereignty. Keep in mind, God is king, as Elimelech's name attests to.

Here is a real stroke of bad luck. Naomi finds herself in a strange land. Her family is back in Bethlehem . She has no friends and no support group. She is stuck here as a widow, with two sons. She is a single mom.

Many women make very poor choices when it comes to men. They either, become sexually active and have children without being married, or they marry the wrong men. In any case, because of some bad decisions, there are all sorts of single moms in our society. Women or men who are married to unhealthy spouses, or spouses addicted to work, alcohol, drugs, sex, or pornography are in reality widows or widowers. If they have children, they are single parents. If we make bad decisions with relationships, we can count on a string of bad luck heading our way.

People who make career decisions on money or prestige can be sure that a string of bad luck is headed their way. It seems to me that if we make a bad decision, bad luck is not far behind. I learned a lot of valuable lessons in sports. One lesson was that the people who get themselves in position to make a play often end up making lucky plays. In other words, if a baseball player knows a batter, and plays him accordingly, and if he hustles to the ball and gives it his all, he often finds himself making a lucky catch. Good decisions put us into a position to be lucky. Bad decisions

almost always are accompanied by bad luck.

B. BAD CHOICES PERPETUATE MORE BAD CHOICES (4)

Verse 4 to me is tragic because bad choices perpetuate more bad choices. It wouldn't be bad if we just made one bad choice and we had to suffer for it, but one bad choice leads to other bad choices. Just think about the children of these relationships that are unhealthy. They grow up not knowing the love and stability of a healthy home. And so they grow up and make many of the same mistakes because they grow up with the same unhealthy values.

Here is the next mistake. Instead of going home, her two sons get married to Moabite women. The last time we saw the Hebrew men with foreign women in Moab was when the women came down to camp and started to party with the men. They were having sex all over the place. God sent a plague that killed 24,000 and the plague ended when a priest named Phinehas saw an Israelite man walk right past Moses with one of these women and took her into his tent. While the couple was having sex, Phinehas went in and drove a spear right through both of them. That ended the plague.

But here we are. Naomi's sons are now married to Moabite women. We're not sure what their names mean, but most think Orpah means *neck*. In other words, she could have had a long neck, which would mean beautiful or graceful. Or *neck* could have to do with strength or stiffness. She could have been strong-willed.

Ruth seems to mean a female companion, which would fit the story. Not only have they left behind the land God gave them, they have left behind the history and ways of God. Let's think where this family is. Elimelech means *God is my king*. Elimelech is gone and so are the gifts and blessings of God. They are in Moab . God's blessings are in Israel .

I think that's why so many times we find ourselves confused and unhappy. We find ourselves immersed in the world and worldly things that we think

will make us happy. However, we find these things bring us misery and unhappiness. But instead of cutting our losses, we continue to pursue these things by making more bad choices. Bad choices perpetuate more bad choices and more bad luck seems to follow us around.

C. BAD CHOICES AFFECT OTHERS AROUND US (5)

Elimelech, Naomi, and their sons have all made bad choices and it doesn't stop there. Verse 5 illustrates the point that the bad choices we make affect others around us as well. Look at the last sentence in verse 4 because it is connected to verse 5. It says, "After they had lived there about ten years." The Hebrew word for "lived there" is *yashub*. It means that they settled down there. They occupied the land. They inhabited the land. In other words, they were full-fledged citizens. Please don't miss the author's point. They started off on this journey intending to only stay for a short while. Then they got comfortable and lived there. And here we see that they have settled down.

We often get trapped into sin and all sorts of hopeless lifestyles the same way. We think, "I'll just dabble in some worldly stuff, whether it is sex, or drugs, or movies, or pornography, or innocent flirting, or business deals." Then after we get into it, we start to get comfortable living in the world in worldly ways, and finally, we settle down into a worldly and sinful lifestyle. We forget the things of God. But know this. Bad decisions affect our family, or friends, and our church community.

Look here. Both children die as well. Elimelech made the decision to leave Israel to go to Moab. He died and his sons died. Who ended up holding the bag? His wife Naomi. Because of Elimelech's bad choice, his wife was left without their ancestral land, without a husband, and without children. She was in a foreign land with no visible means of support. She was lonely, old, and broke. She appears to be left with no future and no hope.

The next time we are about to make a bad decision, we need to remember

that our decisions affect other people. Can Elimelech go back and say sorry to his wife? People who commit suicide are really very selfish. Sure, he's dead. But his parents, friends, children, wife, and church family are left behind to suffer. Let's pretend for a moment that my family and friends love me. If I commit suicide, my wife and children will not be able to go on with life very easily. They will wonder if that was an unforgivable sin John committed? Will we not see him someday in heaven? Friends have trouble reconciling my death with my faith. As a pastor, this act of suicide may destroy all the years of preaching I did. Suicide may be the easy way out for the person committing suicide, but it leaves more victims behind. If you're thinking about committing suicide, don't. Put that energy into doing something productive. Don't leave us behind to try and figure out what happened. Like Elimelech, you won't be able to say sorry.

And think about people who have affairs. As an Army Chaplain, I had to make rounds and see women whose husbands had affairs. These women were dying because their husbands gave them aids. Will saying, "I'm sorry" fix anything? We somehow think in our society that if we just say we're sorry that everything should be all right. It doesn't work that way. Elimelech mad a bad decision. It cost his two sons their lives because they seem to have followed in their father's footsteps. It left his wife a widow, childless, and destitute. There are not enough *sorry's* in the world to fix that.

III. EPILOGUE

Many of us have made bad decisions and we continue to make bad decisions. The problem is that **MAKING BAD CHOICES DOESN'T ONLY AFFECT THE ONE WHO MAKES THE BAD CHOICE. ONE BAD CHOICE SETS OFF A WHOLE SERIES OF BAD CHAIN REACTIONS.**

fter preparing this sermon, it may sound a little extreme and harsh. But if you go back and study Genesis through Judges, I think the author of this book has given us every indication that this tragedy was set off by one bad decision. I think the author wants us to gasp and cover our mouths in horror as we read these opening 5 verses. I'm pleading with all of us here this morning to stop the bleeding. I want to encourage us to quit trying to make bad decisions work. Please wherever we find ourselves in the bad decision making process, let's cut our losses. Let's let it go and get back on the right track. **THERE ARE ALWAYS SEVERE CONSEQUENCES TO MAKING BAD CHOICES IN LIFE. HOPEFULLY WE WILL COME TO OUR SENSES QUICKLY ENOUGH TO CORRECT THESE.**

I have told several stories this morning. Let me just read one more. It's a story that Jesus told.

¹¹To illustrate the point further, Jesus told them this story: "A man had two sons. ¹²The younger son told his father, 'I want my share of your estate now, instead of waiting until you die.' So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons.

¹³"A few days later this younger son packed all his belongings and took a trip to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money on wild living. ¹⁴About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve. ¹⁵He persuaded a local farmer to hire him to feed his pigs. ¹⁶The boy became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything.

¹⁷"When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, 'At home even the hired men have food enough to spare, and here I am, dying of hunger! ¹⁸I will go home to my

father and say, "Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, ¹⁹and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired man."

²⁰"So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long distance away, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. ²¹His son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.'

²²"But his father said to the servants, 'Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger, and sandals for his feet. ²³And kill the calf we have been fattening in the pen. We must celebrate with a feast, ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and has now returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.' So the party began.

²⁵"Meanwhile, the older son was in the fields working. When he returned home, he heard music and dancing in the house, ²⁶and he asked one of the servants what was going on. ²⁷'Your brother is back,' he was told, 'and your father has killed the calf we were fattening and has prepared a great feast. We are celebrating because of his safe return.'

²⁸"The older brother was angry and wouldn't go in. His father came out and begged him, ²⁹but he replied, 'All these years I've worked hard for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to. And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends. ³⁰Yet when this son of yours comes back after squandering your money on prostitutes, you

celebrate by killing the finest calf we have.'

³¹"His father said to him, 'Look, dear son, you and I are very close, and everything I have is yours.' ³²We had to celebrate this happy day. For your brother was dead and has come back to life! He was lost, but now he is found!"
Luke 15:11-32 (NLT).

This young boy may have thought that he only affected himself. He may have said to himself, "I was the one who suffered the consequences of my own sin." But think about it. The father suffered every day that boy was away. He waited every day for him to return.

He caused a family division because his older brother now felt unfairly treated. Oh sure, he came home and apologized, and in the story that works fine with God.

But does saying he's sorry make up for all the suffering his father did? Is saying he's sorry going to be enough to repair the division in the family? Is saying he's sorry going to recover all the family fortune he blew?

I know that's a common thought today, that we are willing to suffer the consequences of our stupid behavior. But it's a lie. Our stupid behavior ruins people's lives around us.

I just want to leave us with this thought. When the prodigal son finally realized he had made a whole series of bad decisions and decided to cut his losses, Jesus described the process as "finally coming to his senses." In other words, while he was making willful bad decisions, he was out of his mind. If we start to make bad decisions, we are out of our minds. Let's come to our senses, cut our losses, and start making good decisions again.

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