

HOW TO MAKE TOUGH CHOICES

Various passages

Treasuring Christ Church – Pastor Boyd Johnson

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INTRODUCTION

We are taking a break this week from Ephesians. And doing something we don't typically do – a topical message. As we face the need to vacate this space and find a new home for TCC, it occurred to me that this is a prime opportunity to teach on making biblical decisions. I've called on the church to pray that God would provide us a new space. And the ideal option may not be out there for us. So at some point we have to choose. How would we go about doing that?

And in your life: you have choices to make. And many of those decisions you have to make, you can't just go to a Scripture passage and find the answer to what you're supposed to do.

- Should you get a new job?
- Should you switch majors?
- Should you move?
- Should you date this person?
- Should you pursue this investment?
- Should you buy that thing?

There are hundreds of decisions to be made in this room and you want guidance from God. You may have even wished you knew God's will for your life. So what do we do when we have to make tough choices? When the way isn't clear in the decisions that the Bible doesn't explicitly address?

Crisis at Mizzou

Sometime during my undergraduate years, at the University of Missouri, I came to a crisis. And the crisis was: which way should I walk around the Arts & Science building in the middle of campus. The sidewalk split and you could go left or you could go right before the sidewalk rejoined. And I didn't know which way to go. And the reason I didn't know was because I couldn't figure out God's will. I didn't know whether it was God's will for me to go left or to go right. So I would wonder whether I would miss out on something if I chose wrongly. I wondered: what if God wanted me to talk to someone on one of the paths, but I missed them because I went the other way? So each time I walked this particular part of campus, I would wonder what God's will was. I had to choose something: either right or left. And when I would choose one way and nothing particularly spiritual would happen, I would wonder whether I missed God's will in my life because I chose the wrong path. Was there something great God had in store for me, if only I could have divined the will of God in that very moment and followed his promptings.

I had friends who always seemed to know God's will for their life. They were of the charismatic variety and they would tell me stories of how they "felt" God leading them in this thing or that thing, here or there and then how God would do something amazing—an amazing conversation,

an amazing conversion, an amazing providence. For them, it was all about promptings. They “sensed” the Spirit leading, they said.

I knew I was saved. But I didn’t get Spirit tingles. I didn’t get liver quivers. I could see in the Bible that the apostles would often be led by the Spirit to do things—but I also knew enough of my Bible to know that that’s because they were the apostles and they were getting divine revelation straight from God.

Then my friends would pray and God always seemed to be telling them to do things. And God, for them, was incredibly specific. They’d say that God told them to go here or there; talk to so-and-so about this-and-that. And I would pray and God wouldn’t talk back. Others throughout my life have talked about open doors. For them, following God is as easy as walking through open doors. But I’ve never been able to figure out the hermeneutic. Is the open door open because God opened it or is a trap of Satan? Is the closed door under Satan’s lock and key or is God calling me to persevere?

And others always knew the right thing to do—they said—because they had peace. If they had peace, they did it. And if they didn’t have peace, they didn’t. But what about the toil that Paul speaks about in laboring for the churches? What about the agony of Jesus in the Garden? Not God’s will because no peace?

So either my friends were misled or I was missing out on something crucial to the Christian life. The issue was always “finding God’s will.” I wanted to know God’s will. And my crisis wasn’t limited to which way to walk around a building.

- Who was I supposed to date?
- Was I supposed to date?
- What should I do after I complete my undergrad?
- Where should I live?
- Should I pursue the internship?
- Should I go on the missions trip?
- What’s God’s will for my Friday night?

None of these were addressed in the Bible. I couldn’t turn to a page and find the answer. And so many of our choices in life are like that. We have options. We have difficult decisions. And we think: if I just knew the will of God, it would be easy. And that desire often (not always) springs from a heart that seeks to obey God. I did! I wanted to obey God. If he has a will for my life, then I want to find it because I want to be obedient.

And that brought up another question: If God’s got a will for my life, why’s he always hiding it?

- God says: Obey me.
- I say: Ok, what should I do?
- Does he say?: I’m not going to tell you. You gotta grope around and figure it out by a certain combination of open and closed doors, peace feelings, and Spirit-promptings.

Is that the way God is?

If not, then why is everyone trying to find God's will as if it's lost or hidden? Is this really the way we are to go about making decisions biblically?

The Senses of God' Will

One of the reasons that this all was so hard for me then, was that I misunderstood what the will of God is. I didn't realize that when we speak of the will of God, we could be speaking about the will of God in different senses. We could be speaking about what many theologians have called God's **will of decree**. This is, in fact, sometimes called God's secret will. This refers to what God has ordained. He is sovereign and brings about what he wants.

Ps 115:3: "Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases."

Eph 1:11: "In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will."

Ac 4:27-28: (when Peter/John released from prison; all the believers praised God for his sovereign will that even willed that Jesus would die on the cross): "[Sovereign Lord] truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place.

As far as God's will of decree—I couldn't possibly know it until it happened. And even then, I may understand only dimly.

We could be speaking about what's been called **God's will of desire**. This is sometimes called his revealed will. This refers to what God has commanded. The Ten Commandments was God's will for Israel to follow. There are many commands in the NT for us to follow. God's will of desire is easier to know: we have the Scriptures. But as I said, so many of our decisions day-to-day don't have a specific text.

Or we could be speaking about God's **will of direction**. This is what we usually mean when we don't know God's will for our life. What does he want me to do in this situation?

And what no one told me at that time—what I didn't come to understand until later—is that:

- I should trust God in his will of decree (trust his sovereign hand)
- I should obey God in his will of desire (obeying the commands revealed in Scripture)
- But God is under no compulsion to tell me his will of direction and I'm not responsible to figure it out before I do something.

Kevin DeYoung in his excellent book, *Just Do Something: A Liberating Approach to Finding God's Will* (subtitled: *How to make a decision without dreams, visions, fleeces, impressions, open doors, random Bible verses, casting lots, liver shivers, and writing in the sky*) says this:

"I'd like us to consider that maybe we have difficulty discovering God's wonderful plan for our lives because, if the truth be told, He doesn't really intend to tell us what it is. And maybe we're wrong to expect Him to. "God does have a specific plan for our lives, but it is not one that He expects us to figure out *before* we make a decision.

“While we are free to ask God for wisdom, He does not burden us with the task of divining His will of direction for our lives *ahead of time*.

“We know God has a plan for our lives. That’s wonderful. The problem is we think He’s going to tell us the wonderful plan *before* it unfolds. We feel like we can know—and need to know—what God wants every step of the way.”

So for a time, I lived in a kind of slavery to discerning the will of God for every avenue of my life. And then I got help and liberated:

- The first help was MacArthur’s *Found: God’s Will*.
- And then I came upon a sermon of his called, “*Making the Hard Decisions Easy*.”

And as I studied and learned more, I came up with my own way to express the same truths that I saw in Scripture. And this morning, I want to pass on to you what I’ve learned. I want to give you a biblical framework for making difficult decisions, especially in the grey areas.

And the framework goes like this:

- Pray for Wisdom
- Probe the Scriptures
- Seek Counsel
- Walk in Faith

I. PRAY FOR WISDOM

Jas 1:5: If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.

We don’t have time to fully exposit this text. So let’s make some brief observations: First, this is clearly about prayer (“ask God”). So when you lack wisdom, pray. Never underestimate prayer. It may seem like nothing happens. But nothing never happens when you pray.

Second, the prayer is for wisdom, not to know the secret will of God for his plan for your life. I make this point because you may have been using this verse to ask God: God, what’s your will of direction for my life in this situation? And that’s not what James is saying. He says to ask God for *wisdom* to make decisions, not ask him to reveal to you all that he will do.

OT version: Pr 3:5-6: Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.

Third, the only condition to receiving is asking. “let him ask God. . . and it will be given him.” So ask!

Fourth, it is the Lord’s loving desire to impart wisdom to you. He gives generously to all without reproach. Now, he qualifies the “all” in the next verse to mean believers. But to his children, our Father wants to grant you lavish wisdom to help you in all your trials and decisions.

The second step in making biblical decisions. . .

II. PROBE THE SCRIPTURES

Look to the Scriptures for guidance and ask three questions.

1. Is there a precept/command to obey?

Is there any command in the Bible that directly addresses your situation or in some way narrows your choices? Time doesn't allow me to give you more than a couple of examples.

If the situation involves your marriage. Does Ephesians 5 somehow speak to the situation?

Eph 5:22: Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.

Eph 5:25: Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.

Those are commands. Do they apply to your situation? Look for commands that are related generally to what you're dealing with and see if it speaks to the situation. Some precepts don't necessarily come in the form of a command. For example, you might be tempted to cheat a little on your timesheet or underreport taxes.

Pr 11:1: A false balance is an abomination to the Lord, but a just weight is his delight.

So you know that dishonesty like this would be displeasing to the Lord, so you should feel constrained and not do it because you want to live in such a way that pleases the Lord (Col. 1:10).

2. Is there a principle to be followed?

This is huge. Probably most of your hard decisions will be helped by the principles in the Bible. Principles are like guard rails along a treacherous highway. Principles are rules for wise living. Principles have to be applied to be useful. You can find principles all over the Bible and apply them to your decision.

Matt 6:33 is what I call the Kingdom Principle.

“But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.”

That's a command, obviously. But you can broaden it to apply to all sorts of areas of your life that aren't necessarily issues of obedience or disobedience. The principle question is this: Will [the thing I'm wanting to do] advance the kingdom and maximize righteousness?

Or, here's a familiar one: the Golden Rule

Mt 22:39: And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Would show love to my neighbor? Would it help me love my neighbor better?

Or, how about the Fear Principle.

Never do something out of fear (and therefore out of faith) unless it's out of fear of God.

Ps 118:6: The Lord is on my side; I will not fear. What can man do to me?

So don't make a decision out of fear of the future. "We better book this venue over here right now, or else we'll never find something!" "I'm a senior and I've got no other options, I guess I'll date him because I fear graduating without being engaged."

Or, the Principle of Enslavement (JM)

1 Co 6:12: "All things are lawful for me," but not all things are helpful. "All things are lawful for me," but I will not be enslaved by anything."

There was a time that I couldn't look at a J.Crew catalog or go in the store because if I did, I would want it all. Covetousness would rise in my heart. So on this principle, I stayed away.

And there may be certain foods that have enslaved you. You may be addicted to working out. You may love wearing that clothing item because every time you do, you get looks—you're enslaved to being gawked at.

Or, the Principle of Concealment

1 Pe 2:16: Live as people who are free, not using your freedom as a cover-up for evil, but living as servants of God.

Oh, how good we are at doing something good as a cover up for something bad. You can love yourself loving other people. Or, you can say I'm going to watch this movie/TV show with this person because my unsaved friend is going and maybe I can develop a relationship with him—and all along, you know what kind of movie will be played.

Or, the Principle of Exaltation

1 Co 10:31: So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

Will it glorify God?

Find more in MacArthur's sermon I referenced earlier. You ought to keep a list of these that you can go through when you're trying to making a decision.

3. Is there a preference to give up?

If your decision isn't governed by a precept or a principle, then perhaps it's merely a preference. But sometimes you should give up your preference for the sake of others. We don't have time to get into this very deep. But read Romans 14 and 1 Cor. 8. In 1 Cor. 8 Paul is addressing the situation where meat sacrificed to idols is being served at dinner and a Christian is there and is offended. He came out of idol worship and seeing the meat on the table that came from the temple is more than he can handle.

And Paul's response is in v. 13: "Therefore, if food makes my brother stumble, I will never eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble." So, is there a preference to give up?

Third. . .

III. SEEK COUNSEL

One of the reasons why it's good to get counsel from others is that you might not know of a command or principle in Scripture that directly addresses your decision. Or, you might be blind—either because it didn't occur to you or because of sin—to factors that weigh importantly to your decision.

Pr 11:14: Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety.

Pr 12:15: The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice.

Pr 13:10: By insolence [disrespect] comes nothing but strife, but with those who take advice is wisdom.

Pr 15:31-33: The ear that listens to life-giving reproof will dwell among the wise. Whoever ignores instruction despises himself, but he who listens to reproof gains intelligence. The fear of the Lord is instruction in wisdom, and humility comes before honor.

Pr 19:20: Listen to advice and accept instruction, that you may gain wisdom in the future.

Pr 24:6: by wise guidance you can wage your war, and in abundance of counselors there is victory.

Pr 27:9: Oil and perfume make the heart glad, and the sweetness of a friend comes from his earnest counsel.

Finally. . .

IV. WALK IN FAITH

- You've prayed for wisdom.
- You've probed the Scriptures.
- You've sought counsel.

And after all that, it may be time to make a decision, and you can't say for sure—this way or that way. We could get to the end of looking at venues—and there be none that's just a perfect fit. Then what? Make a choice and walk in faith. "Ok God. I want to honor you. My heart's desire is to obey you. This is the way that seems right. Now I put it into your hands. I'm yours. Do with me as you will." You think God is going to despise a heart like that? No. That's the Christian life. Were you hoping that the Christian life would be something other than living by faith?

So take hold of a promise of God and walk in faith.

Maybe like Pr 3:5-6: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.” “I’m trusting you God. I’m trusting wholly in you. I’m not trusting in my own intellect, circumstances, or anything else. So do what you’ve said you will do—make straight my paths.” And he will keep his promises.

CONCLUSION

I’ll close with this observation. Our series in Ephesians has recently taught us how a church grows spiritually. And then we lose our room. Is it a stretch to see a connection? Isn’t this a perfect opportunity for we—as a church—to walk in faith for something as basic as a place to meet.

We will pray on our own, in small groups, and on Wednesday. We will probe the Scriptures. We will confer in counsel. And then we will make a decision and march ahead trusting in God.