

HOW TO MAKE TOUGH DECISIONS BIBLICALLY pt.2

(Proverbs 2 and James 1) After 26 years the president of the bank retired. To replace him the board hired a young man with great promise who was, nevertheless, intimidated by the idea of replacing this veteran leader. So, the new president approached the old president to seek his counsel. “What” he asked him, “is the secret to being a good bank president?” The former president said, “Two words – good decisions.” The young man thought, “Okay.” But then asked, “How do you make good decisions?” The old boss said, “One word – experience.” Again the younger man asked, “Well, how do you get experience?” The veteran replied, “Two words – bad decisions.” Now when you come into a position of leadership and you are told that the only way to get good at it is to go through a lot of failure, that is rather disheartening. To some extent that notion is true. Nothing can replace experience. But there are things that can help us make good decisions other than learning from our own mistakes. Last Sunday and today we are looking together at some of those things, as we consider how to make tough decisions biblically – with wisdom, as God defines wisdom.

I explained last time that by “tough decisions” I mean to address only those questions that do not have an easily discernible Scriptural answer. In fact, it is my assumption, in this address, that the options under evaluation in a decision, are all within the boundaries of God’s law. So, we aren’t addressing questions about whether you should lie or steal or commit adultery. Those questions have very obvious Scriptural answers. We are wrestling with matters of judgment and discretion. Questions like, “*what career should I choose?*” “*what house should I buy? What ministry should I take on?*” These are matters of great importance, of course, but for them there is no clear biblical answer. Still, I must believe that the Bible supplies principles to help us make those decisions. What are those principles? We began that investigation last Sunday and discovered that there are 8 guidelines for making tough decisions biblically. We did not get to them all last week. We only looked at the first three of those. Most of you, I’m sure, remember what those are. Guideline #1 is to renew your mind according to God’s word. ® That is not a step, of course, but something that must be true of your life style. We must be people who come to think like God thinks and view the world as He views it. And meditation on God’s word is key in becoming that type of person. The second thing you must do if you are going to make tough decisions biblically is to follow what you already know to be God’s will. A great deal about God’s will for your life is plainly supplied for you in Scripture. Are you following that? If not, it

is somewhat hypocritical of you to ask for further guidance about additional matters. You are to live out what God has already given to you about His will. The third guidelines that we looked at last Sunday is to seek for service, not for self. The point here is that your own personal desire should not dictate your decision. You are to seek the pleasure of the Lord, not of self if you want to make a decision in accord with Scriptural wisdom.

So now we come to the material new for today. And we begin with our fourth guideline for making tough decisions biblically and that is to pray -- simply to pray for wisdom. Seek God's help in the decision. Proverbs 2:2-6 *Make your ear attentive to wisdom, Incline your heart to understanding; 3 For if you cry for discernment, Lift your voice for understanding; 4 If you seek her as silver And search for her as for hidden treasures; 5 Then you will discern the fear of the Lord And discover the knowledge of God. 6 For the Lord gives wisdom; From His mouth come knowledge and understanding.* The Lord does give wisdom. James 1:5 *But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him.* Not only are we encouraged by these Scriptures to ask for wisdom, there is a promise given that our petition will be answered. This may seem like a silly story, but in 2009, when I was living in Florida and this church in Wexford, Pennsylvania was saying they wanted me to come be the pastor I didn't know what to do. So, I prayed and prayed. One evening I was in my daughter's room praying with her about this decision we needed to make. Should we move to Pennsylvania or not. When we finished praying I turned around and for some reason looked at the fan in my daughter's room. I noticed the brand name of the fan, printed boldly on the front. This is that very fan -- can you read what it says? *Wexford. Wexford.* I am not aware of any fan companies up here, but one evening I prayed for wisdom about moving to Wexford and the next word I saw was: *Wexford.* Now, I had other reasons for coming -- but that experience didn't hurt. Now, of course, any such prayer for wisdom must be more than a set of words. To fulfill the requirements of the promise in James one must really want wisdom. To pray for wisdom sincerely assumes that you will do whatever wisdom may dictate. Some of us fall short right here for we say, "God give me wisdom" but we only want it if it leads us to do certain things.

God promises us two things which are ours according to how much we want them. One is the Holy Spirit, the other is wisdom. In each case, however, wisdom, or the Holy Spirit, may lead us to do things hard on the flesh. To sincerely pray for either means you are given up, sold out, to do whatever they direct and go wherever they lead. That's tough. So many times we pray for wisdom and what we're really saying to God is, "Lord, show me how I can do what I prefer without

feeling guilty about it.” That won’t cut it. You remember that Solomon prayed for wisdom and God gave it to him. Why? Why did Solomon want wisdom? I Kings 3:6-9 *Solomon replied, “You showed great and faithful love to your servant my father, David, because he was honest and true and faithful to you. And you have continued to show this great and faithful love to him today by giving him a son to sit on his throne. 7 “Now, O Lord my God, you have made me king instead of my father, David, but I am like a little child who doesn’t know his way around. 8 And here I am in the midst of your own chosen people, a nation so great and numerous they cannot be counted! 9 Give me an understanding heart so that I can govern your people well and know the difference between right and wrong. For who by himself is able to govern this great people of yours?”* What did Solomon want? To be able to judge his people wisely – for whose sake? Their sake. Solomon did not want wisdom to advance himself, and it was his motive that pleased God. 10-12 *The Lord was pleased that Solomon had asked for wisdom. 11 So God replied, “Because you have asked for wisdom in governing my people with justice and have not asked for a long life or wealth or the death of your enemies— 12 I will give you what you asked for! I will give you a wise and understanding heart such as no one else has had or ever will have!* Solomon asked for wisdom sincerely and got it. But, as I said, that means giving up self-will. Remember in the New Testament Stephen was described as a man full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. His wisdom led him to preach before an angry mob which stoned him to death. Hmm. Are you willing to follow God’s wisdom that far? Then pray. Pray for wisdom. Ask others to pray with you about your decisions. The practice will be good for you and God does and will respond.

Guideline #5 for making tough decisions biblically – Here is where we get more specific in instruction. Step #5 is to seek counsel from others (R). When you have a tough decision, talk it over with others, preferably wise men or women. This is not only common-sense wisdom; it is Biblical. Proverbs 24:6 *Surely you need guidance to wage war, and victory is won through many advisers. 15:12 Mockers hate to be corrected, so they stay away from the wise. 22 Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed. 1:5 A wise man will hear and increase in learning, And a man of understanding will acquire wise counsel.* This doesn’t mean you go to your pagan neighbor. I’m sure a million times some man or woman has chosen divorce partly because, “my friend at work thought it would be best.” Seek **wise** counsel. God has put some in the body of Christ who have gifts of wisdom. Seek their counsel. Seek the counsel of your elders. Seek many counselors.

Does that makes sens to you? If you want to make a good choice seek input from many. None of us is as smart as all of us. But Christians consistently fail to do this. Why? Why would someone not seek counsel? Two reasons: 1- you don't want someone advising you to do what you don't want. You're afraid if you talk over an issue with someone they may say what you don't want to hear. So, you just skip it. One big area where this happens often is dating and marriage. How many couples, or individuals sincerely seek wise counsel about whether or not to marry? Very few. What usually happens is we have a few dates, fall in love and set our sails toward marriage without asking a soul if it is wise. Do young lovers typically care what others think? They aren't open to any discouragement. It is pure folly, but most of us make that colossal decision on marriage without any counsel at all. Couples show up at the pastor's office and ask what? "Will you marry us?" They don't say, "We'd like to talk with you about whether we should get married." It's *we are getting married, and Rev, if you want a piece of the action we'll let you do it.* Now, there are few thing about pastoral ministry I enjoy more than the wedding duties. I enjoy helping couples form a Christ-centered home. It is an honor to be a part of the ceremony. But I would rather you come a bit earlier and talk over the decision to marry before it is practically done. It is wise to discuss that issue, job changes, educational choices and financial decisions – all of these with someone who knows the issues and knows God's word.

The second reason you don't seek counsel is that you don't want to be accountable to anyone. You don't want somebody to know all the reasons for your decision. You don't want anybody to say, "I told you so" when you fall on your face; so you just don't talk about it. Both reasons for skipping counsel are based in pride, that stuff that leads to a fall. Have done with your hesitations. God says, "the wise man seeks counsel." It is guideline #5.

Guideline #6 is – consult your desires and abilities (R) I say, "consult" here because your decisions cannot be dictated by these two factors. But often God will lead us by these two factors --desire and ability. I lump them together because they usually go together. You tend to like to do what you are good at, and vice-versa. Now, by this point I am not at all negating what I have previously said about not letting desires determine what we do. All I am saying here is that desire can be a factor. My wife calls me up and says, "So and so, asked me to do such and such for them. Do you think I should?" What's my first question? "Do you want to?" That usually doesn't settle the issue, but all things being equal it might. If you have two perfectly fine and equal options, you may as well choose the one you prefer. But, I think behind this whole point is the assumption that what God calls you to do He will equip you to do (R). He will make you able. He

may do that by giving you natural in-born ability. He may do that by changing or developing your abilities. But the New Testament calls us to locate and use our peculiar gifts as part of the body of Christ. This means that your task or calling is related to your ability. If you're wondering whether or not to join the praise team the person worshipping in front of you may have an opinion. Can you sing well? Should you be a teacher? Well, do you have native gifts for study and for speech? In the great movie, "Chariots of Fire" there is the scene in which Eric Liddell is being urged to give up his pursuit of Olympic success in order to help out with missions work in China. And he argues on the basis of how God made him. He said, "God has made me fast, and when I run I..." What did he say? *When I run I feel His pleasure.* This does not always solve the problem but it often helps. Almost always God will direct you according to your abilities and since you usually enjoy what you are good at, and do good at what you enjoy, by your desires as well. Just a month after Beth and I were married we attended the great Urbana missions conference in Illinois. I was halfway through with seminary and very much desirous of knowing where God wanted me to serve in His army. I had never felt a great tug on my soul for overseas work, but I knew very well that could just be my flesh shutting out the voice of God. So, I prayed with earnest that winter, and went off to Urbana, asking God to please burden my soul for the ministry I should move toward. So, after a week of listening to speakers urge me toward missionary activities around the globe, I found myself more burdened than ever for the teaching and training of Christians in the United States. I took that burden, that desire to teach believers, as the leading of God. Desire and ability must not dictate but may help direct your decisions.

Guideline #7 for making tough decisions biblically is to read the circumstances (R). You see, God not only can guide us by the book He authored, but also by His creation and providence. What kind of person did He make you to be? That's what you ask under step #6. Under guideline #7 you ask, "with what circumstances has God surrounded me?" There are certain things which, due to circumstances, you are married or single, male or female, a parent or a child, you live here or there – due to these types of things, there are certain things you cannot do. What is God's will for you parents? What kind of ministry should you have? Well, you have children you must care for. That limits you a good deal. No, it doesn't. It directs you. To see your circumstances as negative limitations is to leave God out of the picture. With a sovereign God in the picture your circumstances become a means of guidance if you see them in that way.

We speak of God opening doors and closing doors, thru the circumstances of life. The Apostle Paul used this language several times in his writings. The guidance of the open or closed door.

For example, in I Corinthians 16:8-9 *I will remain in Ephesus until Pentecost; 9 for a wide door for effective service has opened to me, and there are many adversaries.* Paul also wrote of God leading him through the closing of doors. Sometimes Paul would preach for a while in a city, and then they would start throwing rocks at him, which he normally took as God leading him to move on to another city. God does do that. Our son, Andrew, after his freshman year in college was struggling with whether or not to return to school in Chattanooga or go to school closer to home. When he learned that his local grandfather had lung cancer and less than a year to live, that moved him off the fence. He heard his circumstances calling him back home.

But careful now. You can sometimes excuse yourself wrongly by referent to your circumstances. For example, you might say, “Oh, I can’t get involved in that ministry, that interferes with my child’s schedule or that’s too far to drive.” Those are legitimate considerations for determining God’s will but are bad excuses for escaping God’s will. I had a friend once who decided to marry a man because all the circumstances seemed to fit. He was starting a new job. She was quitting hers, and so on it went. Her conclusion, “It must be God’s will for us to marry. It’s so convenient.” You can abuse guidelines #7 and #6 very easily. But, if you follow the previous guidelines and your heart is right, God will lead through circumstances and through your desires and abilities.

#8. This is our final guideline for making tough decisions biblically. It’s a bit different in nature. So, I want to review the previous 7. #1- Renew your mind according to God’s word. #2- Follow what you already know to be God’s will. #3- Seek for service, not for self. #4- Pray for wisdom. #5- Seek counsel from others. #6- Consult your desires and abilities. #7- Try to read the circumstances. #8 is after you do all of that and even while you’re doing that, rest in the goodness and sovereignty of God. (R). The Lord loves you and He will not let you destroy yourself with one unwise decision. Don’t be so uptight over your decision. If your heart is right, either way you go, God will make it good. One of the biggest decisions I ever struggled with was over my choice of seminary. I was all uptight over whether to head to Chicago, or to Jackson, Mississippi. I did all the normal types of things to narrow the decision down to two, but I was stuck trying to narrow it down to one. I had gone to talk to my pastor in Gainesville about it. And he was the one who said to me, “Look, they’re both good choices. Relax. You’ll do fine either place you go.” Hmm. That is often the way it is. Our decisions are between good, better and best. Rejoice in that, and rest in the hands of our heavenly Father. Psalm 73:24 *With Your counsel You will guide*

me, and afterward receive me to glory. This is the sure hope of every child of God. Ultimately we will be in glory; ultimately we can't miss God's best for us.

That concludes our look at the eight rules for making tough decisions. For a few minutes now I want to address some common questions that people have about this subject. A few *whatabouts*. The first is "What about visions or voices?" What about special revelations or words from God? Some folks will defend a decision by an appeal to a special word from God. Some want you to even expect such things when you look to God for guidance. What shall we say? Well, these things certainly happened on occasion in the Bible. I have no real basis for arguing that they can't happen today, but clearly there is reason for concern. Every pastor can tell stories of people excusing sinful or foolish choices with an appeal to some special word from God. It is tempting to just totally dismiss the whole idea, but it is not Scriptural to do so. But it is Scriptural to issue warnings. An alleged special word from God cannot be used to dispense with the other eight steps for decision making. And it certainly is no justification for doing something which is contrary to Scripture. Colossians 2:**18** *Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of the angels, taking his stand on visions he has seen, inflated without cause by his fleshly mind.* Our stand is to be taken on the revealed word of God. Not on visions and voices.

Now, honestly, what most people mean when they claim that God spoke to them, is not that they actually heard a voice or saw a face, but that they had a strong, internal impression about a certain course of action. Christians often interpret their feelings to be messages from the Lord, and they just might be. Those who know the Lord will typically know what types of things God would say anyway. I often will obtain a sense of direction for my life flowing out of a time of worship and fellowship with God, in which I speak with Him about a problem. But, if that sense of direction is not consistent with Biblical principles and values, I need to take a long, hard look at my motivations and desires. It is frequently the case that religious persons attribute to God's leading decisions that were made for improper and selfish motives. I don't know how many times I have inquired with folks about a certain course of action only to be told that they did it because they felt led by God. And people will tell you that as if it should end all debate on the matter. It does no such thing. If God leads you to do something He will have reasons for so doing, and those reasons will be grounded in the principles of God's word. We could say more on this, I understand, but I feel led to move on to our next what-about.

What about lucky dipping as a method of guidance? Lucky dipping is using the Bible sort of like a ouija board. You just sort of let it fall open to any random passage and then you point, hoping to get direction from whatever verse your finger may land upon. One guy tried this, and he pointed to the verse that said, “Judas went out and hung himself.” He didn’t like that so he tried again and this time his verse said, “Go ye out and do likewise.” He really didn’t like that so he tried again and this time his verse said, “What you do, do quickly.” I am not recommending this. It may have worked for you twenty years ago. You may have chosen a wonderful husband this way. But there is no example of this in Scripture. It may have been hard to do with a scroll. But if you want guidance from God’s word, get it by reading and studying and gaining understanding from it, not by lucky dipping.

Our third *what-about* is, what about fleeces? Fleeces are so-called because of the story of Gideon in the book of Judges. God called Gideon to build an army to overthrow Midian, but Gideon wanted to make sure this was really of God. So he laid out on the ground a fleece, a piece of wool and he said to God, “Lord, if this is really what you want then tomorrow morning make the fleece wet and the ground around it dry.” Sure enough, the next day the fleece was wet and the ground dry. Gideon said, “Woah!” But he wanted more certainty, so he asked God to do it again but reverse it this time. Dry fleece. Wet ground. Sure enough that is what happened and ever since then folks have talked about laying a fleece before God. Typically I find the fleeces being laid nowadays do not require a miracle like this one did. We will simply say to God, “Lord, I’m going to call Lauren for a date, and if her father answers I know it isn’t your will.” Billy Graham was encouraged by some to start a national radio ministry, and he chose to lay out a fleece. He said, “Lord, if we collect a certain amount of money by a certain date, we will take that as your leading.” I don’t really have a problem with that if you have gone through the other steps of decision-making and still aren’t settled. But since you are asking for the non-miraculous I don’t think it compares to what Gideon did. It is more like point seven and letting the circumstances give you direction

Our fourth *what-about* is what is usually called a “sense of peace.” You often hear churchy folks talk about having a sense of peace about something, as if that is the guarantee of wise decisions. My concern about this derives from Jeremiah 17:9 *The heart is more deceitful than all else. And is desperately sick; Who can understand it?* There is also the little problem of the devil who may very well assist you toward a false “peace.” There is surely something to be said about

having a clean conscience in a decision, but there is no certainty that a good feeling equates with a good decision or vice-versa.

What-about #5 looks at horoscopes and astrology, mediums and palm-readers. This one is fairly easy to comment on since the Bible expressly condemns such methods of seeking guidance. See Deuteronomy 18:**10-12a** *There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or his daughter pass through the fire, one who uses divination, one who practices witchcraft, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, 11 or one who casts a spell, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead. 12 For whoever does these things is detestable to the Lord.*

Finally, we cover briefly the practice of casting lots, which in our day would be the casting of dice, drawing of straws, flipping of a coin to determine a course of action. This practice does have Biblical precedence to it. Proverbs 16:**33** *The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord.* With that understanding, someone may well pray for God's help and let the dice fly. But such a step should only be taken when the other steps for decision-making have yielded no conclusion. Acts chapter one provides an example of how the casting of lots can be used when the other means have led to an inconclusive place.

I close with this reminder for all of us who have been blessed to know the Lord. Walking in the light of His wisdom is such a blessed happy privilege for the children of God. He calls Himself our Good Shepherd who guides our feet into the paths of righteousness for His name's sake. They aren't the paths of comfort all the time, but they are the right paths that eventually land us in the house of the Lord where we get to dwell forever. Hallelujah!