

HOW TO MAKE TOUGH DECISIONS BIBLICALLY pt.1

Ephesians 5:15-17 *Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, 16 making the most of your time, because the days are evil. 17 So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.* One of the questions that pastors encounter most frequently is, “how do I know God’s will for me?” Should I go to seminary? Should I home-school my son? Should I take the job offer in Texas? What should I do with my declining mother? What should I preach on for the next two Sundays? You hear those questions too, don’t you? Someone comes to you perplexed and uncertain as to the proper course of action to take and they want guidance, they want some insight that will clear away the fog. They may even be in emotional distress over the decision. Possibly right now, you are in anxious over a decision facing you. Tough decisions are called “tough” because they are “tough.” They are difficult, and being a Christian often only makes it tougher because we take seriously the moral and spiritual issues involved in a decision.

Some of you right now are thinking of tough decisions you have to make. All of us will face such decisions. So, few topics strike us as being more clearly relevant than the topic of how to make tough decisions biblically. After wrestling through what to teach on this Sunday this is where I came out. But it will take me two Sundays to do it. Are you ready? How to make tough decisions biblically.

Typically, an address like this is called, “how to know the will of God for your life.” But I won’t call it that because the term “the will of God” carries with it too much excess baggage. One sermon I heard on knowing the will of God made one point – the Bible is the will of God. Just read it and you’ll know. Well, there is truth to that, and when one teaches God’s word he is always teaching people God’s will for their lives. But, I’m not here to tell you that God’s will is for you to believe in Jesus and worship God, and not lie or steal or murder. That is God’s will, but for Christians those really aren’t tough decisions. They may sometimes be hard to carry out, but I hope for you there is no debate over whether or not to kill your boss when he’s too demanding. You know that’s wrong. So, I’m not coming before you to address a whole bunch of questions for which there are well-known and Biblical answers. In fact, an assumption in all that I say on this from hereon is that any decision you will make, any and all of your considered options are within God’s law in Scripture. Certainly, it is never God’s will for you to worship Zeus or to commit adultery. So, I’m not going to spend time on issues like that. We’ll assume that your perplexing options are within

the boundaries of God's law – issues like what school to go to, where to live, what church to join, etc.

Now, when some people think of God's will for their lives they don't just think about the major issues, they think about every single detail. Hannah Smith writes about the woman who each morning, having consecrated the day to the Lord as soon as she woke, would then ask Him whether she was to get up or not, and she would not move until the voice told her to dress. As she put on each article of clothing she would ask the Lord whether she should put it on, and very often the Lord would tell her to put on the right shoe but not the left. There is a very fine book by Garry Friesen on this subject, entitled, "Decision Making and the Will of God." Friesen attacks the common idea that God has a specific moral will for you about everything. He calls this the "dot" view which is that God's will is so detailed it is like a dot and if you don't hit it exactly you miss out. Some folks really think like this. That God has one college picked for me and if I go to the wrong one my whole life will be messed up. I won't meet the right husband or wife. Won't have the right kids. Won't find the right job and on and on go the consequences of one inaccurate decision. Friesen thinks that is ridiculous and I agree. He indicates that God gives us freedom within bounds. I like his story of the first supper – not the last supper, the first supper.

Adam was hungry. He had had a long, challenging day naming animals. His afternoon nap had been refreshing, and his post-siesta introduction to Eve was exhilarating, to say the least. But as the sun began to set on their first day, Adam discovered that he had worked up an appetite.

"I think we should eat" he said to Eve. "Let's call the evening meal 'supper.'"

"Oh, you're so decisive Adam," replied Eve admiringly. "I like that in a man. And 'supper' has a nice ring to it. I guess all the excitement of being created has made me hungry too." As they discussed how they should proceed, they decided that Adam would gather fruit from the garden, and Eve would prepare it for their meal. Adam set about his task and soon returned with a basket full of ripe fruit. He gave it to Eve and went to soak his feet in the river. He had been reviewing the animal's names for about five minutes when he heard his wife's troubled voice.

"Adam, could you help me for a moment? I'm not sure which of these lovely fruits I should prepare for supper. I've prayed for guidance from the Lord, but I'm not really sure what he wants me to do. I certainly don't want to miss His will on my very first decision. Would you go to the Lord and ask Him what I should do about supper?"

Adam's hunger was intensifying, but he understood Eve's dilemma. So, he left her to go speak with the Lord. Shortly, he returned. He appeared perplexed.

"Well?" probed Eve.

"He didn't really answer your question," said Adam. "He just repeated what He said earlier today during the garden tour. 'From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat.'

"But that doesn't solve my problem" said Eve. "What should I prepare for tonight?"

Adam was really feeling hungry now and he said, "I have never seen such crisp, juicy apples. I feel a sense of peace about them. Why don't you prepare them for supper?"

Adam was only halfway back to the river when he heard Eve's call. He was so hungry that he jogged back. His anticipation evaporated when he saw her face.

"More problems?" he asked.

"Adam, I just can't decide what I should do with these apples. I could slice them, dice them, mash them, bake them in a pie, a cobbler, fritters or dumplings. Or we could just polish them and eat them raw. I really want to be your helper, but I also want to be certain of the Lord's will on this decision. Would you be a dear and go just one more time to the Lord with my problem?"

So, Adam went as requested. When he returned he said, "I got the same answer as before. 'From any tree of the garden you may eat freely, but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat.'

Adam and Eve were both silent for a moment. Then Adam said, "You know, Eve, the Lord made that statement as though it ought to fully answer my question. I'm sure He could have told me what to eat and how to eat it; but I think He wants us to make those decisions. It was the same way with the animals today. He just left their names up to me."

Eve was incredulous. "Do you mean that it doesn't matter which of these fruits we have for supper? Are you telling me that I can't miss God's will in this decision?"

Adam explained: "The only way you could do that is to pick some fruit from the forbidden tree. But all of these fruits are all right. Why, I suppose we could eat all of them." Adam snapped his fingers and exclaimed, "Say, that's a great idea! Let's have fruit salad!"

Eve hesitated and asked, "What's a salad?"

Friesen goes on to argue that in decision-making the issue is not always, "what is wrong or right?" implying that only one decision is right and all others are wrong; but the issue may be "what with all these perfectly legal, legitimate options is best or wisest." We face many, many questions like this and so we need some guidelines for our decision-making. We need a method of working through tough decisions biblically. I hope to offer you a method which I believe is Biblically consistent and practically helpful. I will march us through 8 steps, 8 guidelines for making tough decisions Biblically and wisely. Some of you need especially to hear guidelines 1,3,7. Others need to hear 5,6, and 8. I mean that various hearers will find various rules most helpful for them. So, if one doesn't seem to apply to you, keep your ears open for the next. I have ordered the eight in what strikes me as a sensible way, starting with the most basic and general, then moving to the more refined and specific rules. The first few guidelines may seem less useful, but I firmly believe that they are the most critical and most neglected rules of all. If you get the first three and not the last five you'll be in good shape. But, if you get the last five and miss the first three you are in major trouble.

So, here we go. Guideline #1 – Renew your mind according to God's word ®. You say, "Pastor, I thought we were assuming that all our options are within God's law. Now you have a simple rule

like that. You are being inconsistent.” I don’t believe I am. Anybody who reads through the New Testament one time can make a general list of dos and don’ts found there which are also basically consistent with the dictates of conscience. These, of course, must be followed. Must be. That’s our assumption. But the Christian wanting to know and do the best in every case can and should go beyond that. He may, by a spiritual application of his mind to the Scriptures and a consistent meditation upon them come to be renewed in his mind so that he thinks like God thinks and views life as God views it. The person who does this has a great advantage in decision-making.

Any child that comes in to your house for a day or a week can be told and can understand your household rules. But, the child who lives in your house from birth grows not only to know and understand the rules he also will grow to see life as you see it. He will have a deeper understanding of the rules. He will get to know Mom and Dad so well that he knows how you would handle a given situation whether that is clearly stated in the rules or not. You see my point? Why do you seek out certain Christians for counsel? Maybe you think they know a verse which speaks to your specific question, but often you go to a person because you feel he or she knows God more thoroughly than others. The more a person knows the Lord, the more a person’s mind is shaped by truth to think as God thinks, the better able is that person to make wise judgments.

Let’s hear from a few relevant portions of God’s look. Romans 12:2 *do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.* This tells us that the key to proving, testing, perceiving God’s will is what? Personal transformation by the renewal of your mind. Read it again. 2 *do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.* That’s guideline #1. Well, how shall we go about renewing our mind? By exposing it over and over and over again to the word of God. I could do a whole study here about the value of meditation as taught in Scripture. Psalm 1 says the blessed man meditates in God’s word all the day. It means he bathes his mind in it and the word washes off the old thoughts and soaks in the pure truth as it comes from God. Ephesians 4:23-24 *be renewed in the spirit of your mind, 24 and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth.* This says that one who is renewed in mind becomes like God. In college I knew a man whose life’s study was mosquitoes. He ate, drank, and slept mosquitoes, so much that he started to think like a mosquito. If we ever clapped in church he got very nervous. Well, in a much finer way, we can

immerse ourselves in God's book so that we come to think like Him. We take on His values, His concerns, His perspectives.

Often people, speaking on guidance tell you to ask the question, "What would Jesus do in this situation?" ® That's a great question and a nice idea for a bracelet, but the only way you can know the answer to the question is to read of Jesus so much that you really have a good idea what Jesus would do. Frankly, its sheer hypocrisy to ask the question if you are unwilling to give attention and effort to learn what Jesus taught and did. How much effort do you give to learning God's word, how much concern you have to renew your mind? Edwin Hatch wrote the hymn that says, "*Breathe on me Breathe of God, fill me with life anew, that I may love what thou dost love and do what thou wouldst do.*" Kate Wilkinson wrote, "*May the mind of Christ my Savior live in me from day to day.*" Her next prayer in that hymn was this – "*May the word of God dwell richly in my heart from hour to hour.*" Guideline #1 for making tough decisions is not really a step you take at decision time. It must be an ongoing habit of life, because it is the first rule of Christian guidance. Renew your mind according to God's word.

Guideline #2 is, "Follow what you already know to be God's will."® So many times I've seen Christians all worked up over a decision. "Oh, I just wanna know what job God wants me to take. Oh, I just don't know if I should go back to school or not. I only want to do God's will." They say this with all seriousness and expect others to believe that they really want to know and do God's will. But in their lives are blatant areas of disregard for the clear, expressed and written will of God. There is little or no concern to do God's will with their money, with their time, with their relationships. But when a tough decision is faced they put on their sincerest evangelical face and say, "Pray that I would know God's will about my job situation." And you wonder why, if His will matters so little to them. I Thessalonians 4:**3a** *this is the will of God, your sanctification.* Or as one version puts it: *God wants you to live a pure life.* God has already given us a great deal of instruction on how to live our lives. If you want God's will, read it and do it and quit worrying about the things he hasn't spoken of. God's will for you is that you do His word. Are you? That you pray. Do you? That you worship Him, that you be a vital, active, contributing part of your church. Are you? His will for you wives is that you respect your husband, husbands that you love your wives, children obey your parents, workers work hard. Do deeds of service for others, give your money to godly causes, obey your civil authorities, speak the truth. If you aren't striving to do

these things which God has already shown you, then why should He show you which job to take or girl to date or stocks to buy?

Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness. Seek that first, first, first. You know, I may be concerned to be using my time in the wisest way. I may want to know how much time to spend on sermons and studies and prayers and family and outreach and administration and counseling and recreation. I can get all worked up over these issues. What do I cut out of my schedule? But I must never forget that first and foremost I need to concentrate on eliminating sin and waste.

Righteousness precedes wisdom. © John 7:17 (NLT) *Anyone who wants to do the will of God will know whether my teaching is from God or is merely my own.* He says your willingness to do God's will precedes your discovery of it. You see? Does your lifestyle say to God, "Lord, I'm willing to do your will whatever it is." Can God look at you and say, "Joe or Janet is doing what I've shown her that I want. I will show her more?" Can He say it of you?

Jesus taught in one of his parables that the steward or manager who used well what he had been given, received more from the Lord; and the same thing is true in knowing God's will and guidance. When my life is generally together, when I'm working on every issue God has confronted me on, then I can boldly and sincerely say, "Lord, show me the way. Give me your wisdom for areas yet unknown." Guideline #2 is to follow what you already know to be God's will.

Guideline #3 for making tough decisions biblically is to seek for service not for self. © One thing that should be clear biblically is that God doesn't want you living your life with your eyes focused on you. Romans 14:7 *not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself.* Jesus called his disciples to take up their cross, deny self, and follow Him. Now nothing so runs against our natural tendencies as that. By nature, we seek after what feels good to us. Most people make decisions based solely on, "what do I want to do?" The Christian, like his Lord, must renounce such a philosophy and such a practice. We are called to be givers, servants, lovers.

Now this principle doesn't mean that you ask the questions, "what do I not want to do?" and then do that. Sometimes, often, God's will and your desires will be one, but the point here is that often they are not. Jesus prayed, "Father, if it be Thy will, take this cup from Me." In terms of his sheer human desire that was it. But He went on to say, "Nevertheless, not **my** will, but **Thine** by done." Jesus said, "I always do what pleases my Father." The principle here is to not let your desires dictate your decisions. Typically, in a decision you know what you want to do. For

example, when you are buying a new car, you would usually prefer to get the more expensive, fancier model. When deciding what to eat, you'd like to have the steak and the death by chocolate. Now, it may be right to buy the better car and eat the steak, but when you know your desires are tugging at you, you need to be extra careful to think biblically and rationally and make that decision from the position and perspective of a servant of Jesus Christ, and His people. Asking not, "what pleases me, but Lord, what pleases You?"

Now, the practical point here is this: When seeking to learn God's will, empty your heart of self-will. Got it? When seeking to learn God's will, empty your hear of self-will. Self-will is the great deluder. It fools you. You become an expert at justifying your selfish decisions. You look at God's will through the glass of your own heart. A dirty, selfish heart makes vision very hard. Soren Kierkegaard wrote a book entitled, "*Purity of Heart is to Will One Thing.*" And that one thing is God's will. If you **really** want what God wants for you, teach your heart to truly say, "Lord, show me your way and whatever it is – whether easy or hard- show me and I will do it." Psalm 119:**33-34** *Teach me your decrees, O Lord; I will keep them to the end. 34 Give me understanding and I will obey your instructions; I will put them into practice with all my heart.* Can you say that to God with a clear conscience? "I'll go anywhere, do anything, be anything you want." That is not easy, but it's very important for guidance. Don't be afraid that God is going to give you what you hate. He is not out to make you miserable. He's your Father. I remember a Calvin and Hobbs cartoon in which Calvin, who is a young boy in the comic strip, was imitating his dad. He put on his dad's glasses, combed his hair like his dad's and then went into the living room, and to finish his imitation of his dad here is what he said, "Calvin, go do something you hate, misery builds character." I thought about that. That is sometimes the way kids see it, I guess. That is often how people see God. They see God's word saying, "Go off and do something you hate, misery builds character." Well, listen, the God who is may indeed challenge you and stretch you but Jesus came to give us life more abundant, not more easy, more abundant, more meaningful, more fulfilling. Trust Him. Trust Him.

The most prominent figure in my early years in church was our choir director, a man named Veo Gray. Many times I heard him tell his story of how he finished seminary and wanted a position as music director in a church but he had no offers. At the same time he was wrestling through God's will for his life, and his own willingness to do whatever the Lord directed, even if that was to be a missionary to Upawamga. Finally, in a moment of sincere consecration he gave this matter over to

the Lord, presenting himself to God as a foreign missionary if that is what God wanted. The next day he received an offer to be a music director. He often said that God wanted to have his heart, before God would show him his path. Now you may do that and God will send you to Upawanga, I don't know. Be ready! But God will give you a richer life there than you would ever have here. The man or woman of faith knows that happiness is located in God's will and God's calling. So pray as Edwin Hatch in his hymn, "*Breathe on me Breath of God, until my heart is pure, until my will is one with Thine, to do and to endure.*" When your will is one with God's, guidance and confidence are certain realities. If you want guidance for some decisions, work towards that in all of life. Seek for service, not for self.

Well, in God's will for my life, I am persuaded that He wants me to wrap up this message. I'd prefer to go on and cover the other five rules for making tough decisions biblically, but I am committed to doing God's will instead, and I'm sure you agree with him that it is time for me to stop. We will pick up at this point next Lord's day, but did you get guidelines 1-3? Renew your mind according to God's word. Follow what you already know to be God's will. Seek for service, not for self. Jesus said that if we seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, everything else we need – guidance included – will be added unto us. What a blessed promise! What a beautiful challenge! Let's pray