

God Decided To Send His Son — John 3:16

On the wall of our basement rec room hangs a poster that's called "21 Suggestions for Success." They are:

1. Marry the right person. This one decision will determine 90 percent of your happiness or misery.
2. Work at something you enjoy and that's worthy of your time and talent.
3. Give people more than they expect and do it cheerfully.
4. Become the most positive and enthusiastic person you know.
5. Be forgiving of yourself and others.
6. Be generous.
7. Have a grateful heart.
8. Persistence, persistence, persistence.
9. Discipline yourself to save money on even the most modest salary.
10. Treat everyone you meet like you want to be treated.
11. Commit yourself to constant improvement.
12. Commit yourself to quality.
13. Understand that happiness is not based on possessions, power or prestige, but on relationships with people you love and respect.
14. Be loyal.
15. Be honest.
16. Be a self-starter.
17. Be decisive even if it means you'll sometimes be wrong.
18. Stop blaming others. Take responsibility for every area of your life.
19. Be bold and courageous.
20. Take good care of those you love.
21. Don't do anything that wouldn't make your Mom proud.¹

I suppose there could be debate on the wording of some of these suggestions but there's one thing on which probably all of us can agree and that is that all twenty-one require some type of decision. You have to make a decision in order to do any of these things. Life is a decision! The decisions we make determine our lives. And the lives we live are the product of the decisions that we make.

Everything that God does is about love, and that love is targeted at us and at our world.

Last week I heard a radio report saying that human decisions are made in one billionth of a second. Now the skeptic in me makes me wonder which scientist actually timed that. I've watched people in restaurants who significantly bring up that average by how long it takes them to decide what to order!

It is because decisions are so very important that we're going to take several Sunday mornings to talk about some of the great decisions that are in the Bible. The purpose is not only to learn about those decisions but also to learn how to make good decisions ourselves.

As far as we humans are concerned, the number one great decision of all of cosmic history was the decision of God to send his Son for our salvation.

God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

This monumental decision by God the Father grew straight out of the character of God. But then again, all decisions come from character. In God's case, his character is love. That's who God is. You can take anything that God says, anything that

God does — scratch a little bit below the surface and you will find God's love. It isn't even so much that God chooses to love. That's just the way God is. It's the way God is wired.

God always wants to love. He always desires what is in the best interest of another person.

We sometimes refer to "maternal instinct" when we see a woman do something for her child that probably she never would otherwise do — even at the risk of her own life. Yet no surgeon can cut a woman open and find the place where maternal instinct is. It is part of who she is deep inside, and it affects all of the decisions that she makes and everything that she does.

Well, God has a love instinct deep inside of him. Love guides God. Love drives God. Love is God. Everything that God does is about love, and that love is targeted at us and at our world. We can apply that principle to us, for our deci-

sions also come out of our character. The actual decision may only take a billionth of a second but the reality is that all the decisions that we make, whether the smallest and most routine or the largest and most monumental, are the result of everything that we are on the inside for a lifetime before that decision was made.

When we analyze it, we begin to see that loving people make loving decisions. Hateful people make hateful decisions. Generous people make generous decisions. Greedy people make selfish decisions. Our decisions are a product of who we are as persons.

There is a fascinating process at work in our lives that seems contradictory, but isn't. While it is true that our decisions come from our character, it's also true that our decisions shape our character. It works both ways. Every decision that we make shapes who we are on the inside. We know from personal experience and from observation that making a loving decision builds a loving character. Make a decision to forgive and become a more forgiving person. Decide to give when previously you've been stingy and that will build a generous character. I think a good way to explain how this works is by comparing character to exercise. If someone is terribly out of shape, it is not very likely that that person will start exercising. You might say that he is not only unwilling, but also unable to exercise. But, if for some reason, a decision is made to start doing just one small exercise, the resulting improvement to his physical condition will create a ripple effect that encourages more and more exercise until the character and life of the person is changed.

This is not just a word game. This is a character analysis. Who we are determines what we decide. What we decide shapes who we are. Now that's exactly where God fits in. If I'm an unloving person and I receive God's overwhelming and powerful love into my life, I begin to behave in a loving way because of God's influence on me, and a transformation begins to take place. God gives us the power to make decisions that change our character.

Now there's a second principle that builds on this first one. That second principle from God's great decision to send his Son is that decisions always cost. This was certainly true for God when

he gave his one and only Son. God the Father and the God the Son had always been together — forever and ever. The decision to send his Son to earth to become human was a definite and deliberate distancing, and it must have been very hard.

Some of you parents sent your five year olds off to kindergarten this past week for the first time. You walked to the bus stop with them and returned home alone. My bringing it up is making your hands tremble and your eyes tear up again at the realization of what a monumental distancing this is from your child. Others shipped your eighteen year olds off to college recently. It's hard to say good-bye. It's hard for us and it was hard for God.

But God didn't just send his Son off to kindergarten; or to college, he sent his Son to die. This was more than a brief separation. He sent his Son to become human, to die a terrible death by crucifixion, to be doused in the acid of human sin, to experience a wrenching spiritual separation from God the Father unlike anything that had ever happened before. God decided to send him, fully knowing what the cost would be.

There's a terrible old story about a train switchman who was in a tower overlooking a switchyard that was not very distant from a large ravine with a trestle that went over that ravine. As he surveyed the territory for which he was responsible he noticed that his young son had ventured out on the trestle and was playing on the tracks. At the same moment he saw a passenger train that somehow without explanation had gotten on a wrong track that was headed through a construction area at a sufficient speed so that it would not be able to stop before going into the ravine killing hundreds of people. That father had the power to throw a switch that would save the passengers' lives by diverting the train onto the trestle. It was a decision that no father should ever have to make. No one should ever have to make that kind of a decision. He had to choose between the life of the son that he loved and the lives of hundreds of passengers. The father made the wrenching choice to let his boy die so that the passengers could live. And he had to watch his son be hit and die.

In a sense that is what God the Father did when he decided to send his one and only Son. The cost was great. But there would have been a cost either way. If God had decided not to send his Son to

take the penalty for our sins, then we would have been like the passengers on that train — doomed. Doomed to sin and death. Now I know we don't like to use the word hell or hear much about it. I don't. I don't like to say it. But that's exactly where all of us would have gone — into the gorge to an awful crashing eternity without God, to a death that would last forever.

All decisions have a cost. There is a cost to stay married and a cost if we divorce. There is a cost to keeping the job and a cost to quitting the job. There is a cost to telling a lie, but there is also a cost to telling the truth. There's a cost to greed and there's a cost to generosity. There is a cost to love, just as there is a cost to hate.

Jesus strongly emphasized the importance of counting the cost in becoming a Christian. He told would-be disciples that there is a price to following him. It can be very difficult. This principle that decisions have a cost carries over into all of our decisions and especially life's most important decisions. So before deciding whatever decisions you are dealing with right now, carefully and prayerfully think through what that cost will be either way. Especially avoid the tragic mistake of considering only the short term. Don't go for the immediate benefit or a quick thrill and ignore the long-term price of the decision.

As Christians we need to be especially concerned that we choose what is right by God and by God's book, the Bible, regardless of the cost. No doubt there are decisions that will be pricey for us. It is a costly decision to be a fully committed follower of Jesus Christ. There is a cost to living Christianly, to telling the truth, to living a sexually moral life, to keeping promises. Even though these right decisions always come with a price, they are always worth it in the long term.

Now a third and a final principle for us to learn from God's great decision is that decisions impact others.

God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

I know that sometimes we think and behave as

if we are islands unto ourselves. That is a result of our culture which emphasizes individuality, self-sufficiency and selfishness. In most of the cultures of the world there is a great emphasis on community, while we tend to think of ourselves in isolation from other people.

Suicide is a painful example. People who commit suicide are so overwhelmed by the problems and pains they face that they lose sight of the impact that their terrible decision has upon those who love them most.

Extramarital affairs are among the most secret and private decisions a person makes. Yet there are very few decisions with greater consequences on the people involved — upon children, upon family, friends and society. Extramarital affairs may be started in a passionate billionth of a second, but they change the lives of others forever.

Marriage and divorce are usually considered highly personal decisions. The church may even be criticized for getting involved in either situation. Sometimes when people are making these

huge important decisions of life they ignore their family, ignore what the church has to say or what the Bible has to say. But the truth is that decisions to marry, to stay

married or to get divorced are like rocks thrown into a pond — their ripples can spread to distant shores.

Acts of kindness are another example. Every day each one of us encounters many other people. If we decide to commit acts of kindness to others, we can transform the lives of others. Kind words on the telephone, writing a gracious note, letting somebody else have his or her way, yielding to another driver, spending time with somebody who's lonely — these things that only take a moment or two can transform somebody else's life. They are not lone transactions, for every decision impacts others.

The shows we choose to watch on television make a difference, as our minds and those of the other people in our household are influenced by what we see. The entertainment industry also makes its programming decisions based on our

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viewing choices. This list goes on and on and becomes all-inclusive because every decision we make impacts our lives and affects the lives of other people as well. That makes our decisions very important, especially for Christians who are the agents of God. We are God's influencers in our country, in our family, in our business and in our world.

Nowhere is this principle better demonstrated than in God's all-important decision to send his one and only Son, Jesus, *that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life*. God's decision gave us a pathway to heaven so that by believing in Jesus Christ we could have eternal life with God. God's decision gave us an escape from hell. Whoever believes in Jesus shall not perish. God's decision gave us the opportunity to begin to experience God's eternal life now — it is not something merely waited for on the other side of the grave. Becoming a Christian means that God transforms us right away. The love and power and the presence of God changes our decisions, reshapes our character and alters our lives by changing our destiny. God's decision reaches out to every person ever conceived. Every person. Every gender. Every language. Every tribe. Every race. Count it as the most far-reaching decision ever made.

What are the most important decisions that you have to make? You know you have them because we all have them. I urge you to base your decisions on who God wants you to be, on character. Make the decision that you are now contemplating out of love. Be willing to pay the price to do what is right no matter what that price is. And decide for the good of others. Don't pretend that

you live as an island unto yourself, but recognize that the decisions you make will impact the life of someone else.

Last of all, if you haven't decided yet about Jesus Christ, I encourage you to say, "yes" to God's great offer. Accept God's one and only Son, Jesus, as your Savior from sin and as leader of your life. Pray a prayer of faith. Tell God that you have decided to become a Christian. In other words, do not perish, but have eternal life.

¹ H. Jackson Brown, Jr., *21 Suggestions for Success*, published and distributed by Portal Publications, Ltd., Corte Madera, California, 1993.

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