

Making Important Decisions • Romans 12:3

We often define Christians by what we believe. That's good and right. A Christian is someone who believes in Jesus as Savior and Lord. However, Christians are also defined by what we do. It's important that we not only believe like Christians but also act like Christians.

Over the next few months we are going to take a look at what a Christian acts like in everything from sexuality to money and from grieving loss to loving others. At the end of our series I hope we will have a clearer picture of how a Christian should act and that we will be more Christian in our behavior. But, today we begin with how a Christian makes important decisions. How we make decisions and the decisions we make define us as much or more than anything else.

There is one central defining element in Christian decision-making and that is who we want to please. Rick Warren opens his best selling book, *The Purpose Driven Life*, with the statement: "It's not about you." As Christians we are not about ourselves. We are about God. If God is happy, we are happy. If God is not happy, we are not happy. If it's what God wants then it's what we do. If it's not what God wants then we don't do it.

We live in a world that says we should take care of ourselves, look out for Number One. It is the ultimate atheism to believe and live as if there is no God and we are most important: "Do what you want; get what you want; enjoy life and die. That's what life is about."

As Christians we insist there is so much more to life. God is great. God is good. What life is all about is pleasing him. And pleasing him is not only right by God but it is good for us. St. Paul put it like this in Romans 12:2:

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and ap-

prove what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.

You see, God is absolutely committed to the very best for us. What he wills for our lives is good, pleasing and perfect. Put him first and we all win.

Recently we took a survey at Wooddale Church to see what concerns us when we have decisions to make, especially in determining God's will. The primary areas of concern were:

- 1.) Purpose in life
- 2.) Marriage
- 3.) Career
- 4.) Missing God's will
- 5.) After difficulty or defeat

Let me explain those last two. Number 4 refers to making decisions after missing out on God's best.

One person wrote: "What about Plan B or C or D?" In other words, if you didn't do what God wanted you to do and history can't be changed, what do you do then? Number 5 refers to decisions following bankruptcy, loss of a job, death of a loved one or some other major setback in life. For example: "Should I marry the person I'm dating?" "Should I quit my job, go back to school and start a new career?" "I married the wrong person, so should I get a

divorce and find someone else?" "Should I sell my house and car and get out of debt?"

I'm going to assume you're a Christian and that you want God's will for the decision you are making. If you are not a Christian things get a lot more complicated and a whole lot harder. Non-Christians can make good decisions but believers have a huge advantage. So, keep your important decision in mind and we will consider some steps to deciding well.

The first step is to love God. The sixteenth century Swiss reformer John Calvin said that Christians should love God and then do as they please. At first that may seem troublesome, but it's saying that if we love God then we will make

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good decisions based on what God wants from us. I like that. It keeps everything simple. Jesus said in Mark 12:30, “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.*” Anyone who loves God that passionately can do whatever she wants to do. We don’t need to put all our energy into deciding which house to buy or which college to attend. Just love God all the way and do whatever you want.

Step Number 2 in determining God’s will when making a decision is to check the Bible. It’s a big book with lots of very practical advice on how to live and what to do. If the Bible says something is wrong, don’t do it. If the Bible is silent about what you’re trying to decide, don’t sweat it.

If you’re thinking about moving in with the person you’re dating, don’t. The Bible advises against premarital sex. Are you thinking about marrying someone who isn’t a Christian? Whoa! The Bible is very clear that Christians should only marry other Christians. But, if you’re trying to decide what color car to buy, the Bible doesn’t say what color God prefers, so anything goes. I like red! The Bible doesn’t tell us which job to take, where to invest in a 401(k) or whether we should go out for lacrosse or football. It does tell us to work honestly, invest wisely and play fair. So, check out the Bible to at least find out what it says.

Step Number 3 is to pray for wisdom. If the Bible directly tells us what God wants then there isn’t much need to pray about it. If you’ve been agonizing over whether or not you should rob a bank, save your time. Don’t even pray. If God has already been clear then it is simply not something you need to pray about. Just do what the Bible says.

But that’s not where most of us are. Most of us are in those gray areas of uncertainty where the choice could be made either way. As Christians who thoroughly love God we want to get this right. At least we think we do. So the Bible tells us in the book of James to pray for wisdom. Wisdom is smarts. Wisdom is the application of knowledge and information. Wisdom is a gift from God that is given to every Christian who asks for it. So try this. Instead of praying “God, show me which apartment to rent”, try praying “God give me the wisdom to figure this out for myself and get it right.”

Number 4 is to ask for advice. That’s because none of us is smart enough or has enough experience to make totally independent decisions. The sage in Proverbs 15:22 said, “*Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisors they succeed.*” That’s not a guarantee because if you have fourteen advisors who are jerks your plans probably won’t succeed. But it’s a principle and it is a very good principle.

Personally, I ask a lot of advice when making decisions. I ask Charleen for counsel on decisions small and great. I regularly seek the advice of co-workers, of the elders of Wooddale Church, of family, friends and professionals.

Not everyone’s counsel is equally good. We need God’s wisdom to know who to trust and who not to trust. Getting input from multiple sources is usually more helpful than just one counselor. Experience over years of seeking advice often makes us better at knowing who to ask and whose advice to take.

The best combination is a counselor who is both competent and godly. Some friends are godly but incompetent. They love God; they just give terrible advice. Some professionals are competent but ungodly. Sometimes we need to get expert advice from an ungodly expert and spiritual advice from a godly Christian and then merge the best of both. The counsel of others does not relieve us of our responsibility. Advice is advice. Counsel is counsel. But each of us is responsible for the decisions we make.

The fifth step is to do what seems best. This may seem like the least likely item to be on a list of how Christians act when making decisions. Love God; check the Bible; ask for wisdom; talk to counselors; then just decide. Will we usually have all the facts we need to make a good choice? Almost never. Will we be sure to make the right decision? Sometimes, but not always.

I want to show you how Christians in the New Testament, people that were close to God and authors of the Bible, made important decisions. They repeatedly decided the best they could and then did what they decided. Without going into each story let’s look at several verses.

In Acts 15:28 we read, “*It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with any-*

thing beyond the following requirements.” So, they made a major theological decision because it seemed like a good idea.

Acts 19:21 says, “After all this had happened, Paul decided to go to Jerusalem, passing through Macedonia and Achaia. ‘After I have been there,’ he said, ‘I must visit Rome also.’” He didn’t have a fleece; he didn’t have a written message from God; he just decided.

Acts 20:2-3 goes on to say, “He traveled through that area, speaking many words of encouragement to the people, and finally arrived in Greece, where he stayed three months. Because the Jews made a plot against him just as he was about to sail for Syria, he decided to go back through Macedonia.” Because there was opposition he changed his itinerary.

Acts 20:16 tells us, “Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus to avoid spending time in the province of Asia, for he was in a hurry to reach Jerusalem, if possible, by the day of Pentecost.” Paul looked at his clock and his calendar and said, “Wow, if I’m going to make it there in time, I’d better go another way.”

In 1 Thessalonians 3:1 Paul writes, “So when we could stand it no longer, we thought it best to be left by ourselves in Athens.” The “we” here includes his colleague Silas, and if you read the next line, you discover that they left Timothy behind. We talk about making major life decisions for ourselves, but here Paul made a major decision for Timothy. He said, “You’re no longer on the team. I’m sending you in a different direction.” And he made that decision because he thought it best. It seemed like a good idea.

And Paul says in 2 Corinthians 8:10, “And here is my advice about what is best for you in this matter.”

The point here is that when critical decisions were made there wasn’t lightening from heaven. They didn’t have absolute certainty. They simply loved God, checked the Bible, prayed for wisdom,

sought counsel and then decided the best they could with the information they had.

All of this leads to the bottom line which is to trust God with the outcome. Did they always get it right? That’s a good question. It depends on what you mean by getting it right. If getting it right means that everything turned out happy and pleasant then they didn’t always get it right. If you mean by getting it right that they followed a Christian process and focused more on how they made the decision than on the final outcome then the answer is yes, they got it right.

We are prone to make decisions totally on the basis of a pleasant outcome. If the job is successful, if the marriage is happy, if the house appreciates then we seem to think that we made the right decision and discovered God’s will. On the other hand, if the job is hard, the marriage is difficult or the house needs a new roof we tend to think that we missed God’s will.

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Let’s understand God’s will more in the way we decide and the way we live than in the perfect outcome of the decisions we make. Most of the authors of the Bible died as martyrs. Many godly Christians have lived difficult lives. That doesn’t mean that God’s will was missed or that a wrong decision was made.

As Christians, we live by faith. Faith means that we trust God for the outcome. We love God, follow the Bible, pray for wisdom, get good counsel, decide the best we can and then leave the rest to God. If everything turns out great we are grateful. If life is harsh, we are still Christians who will live faithfully through the hardships and difficulties.

Recently, Charleen and I were talking about our years of marriage together. It wasn’t a “what if” conversation. It was a “did you ever think that” conversation. “When we were married did you ever think we would live in the places we’ve lived? Charleen, did you ever think you would work for a daily newspaper? Leith, did you ever think you’d become a mobile home repairman? Did you think we would have four children? Did you think we

would live most of our lives in Minnesota? Did you think that Leith's older brother would die so soon?"

When we got married we had no idea what our lives would be like. At an age that was younger than most when they are married I vowed to love her "for richer, for poorer; for better, for worse; in sickness and in health until death us do part."

Marriage was about relationship, not primarily about the specific decisions. We made decisions about going to a university in Illinois, choosing a graduate school in Colorado, coming to Wooddale Church in Minnesota. At times Charleen and I have talked and prayed and made major decisions with ease; other times we have made major decisions in agony. The other day we were having a conversation about landscaping. Several years ago we made a decision about how to landscape our yard. I asked Charleen if she remembered how much that cost. She had no idea; I had no idea either. What seemed like the most important decision at the time somehow had been lost in time. But the relationship was far more important than the decisions.

God's will is most about relationship. To be a Christian is to have a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. It is not most about career or money or even marriage. It is most about a relationship with God. When making the important decisions of life we need to worry less about the outcome and focus far more on the relationship. To be a Christian is to love God wholeheartedly and then to live life for him. In our relationship with God we may have riches and poverty, sickness and health, good times and bad times. We will get some decisions right; we will get some decisions wrong. But it's our relationship with him that matters most of all.

Getting back to the decision you must face today or next month:

- Love God.
- Check the Bible.
- Pray for wisdom.
- Ask for advice.
- Do what seems best.
- Trust God for the outcome.

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