

Biblical Living (17) – Decision Making

Big, small, momentous, inconsequential—Christians make decisions every day. And when faced with big decisions, they often go to counsellors for advice. As a rule, don't make the decision for the person. Instead, teach him or her a sensible, biblical decision-making process.

Common wrong approaches to decision-making

1) The purely pragmatic approach. All the practical aspects of a decision are meticulously sorted and weighed, but what God says in the Bible is ignored. Before buying a house, the purely pragmatic person will research interest rates, prices, and styles. He is practical. However, he won't bother to research what the Bible says about debt. He is a practical atheist; he makes decisions as if God did not exist. When deciding if the wife should work outside the home after they have children, the pragmatic couple will weigh income and career aspirations against time with the kids. They are practical. However, they won't go to the many Bible verses on that subject and discover what God has said about ordering a family. They often make sharp businessmen, orderly housewives, or efficient elders. However, their wisdom is merely a worldly wisdom. They make decisions based on "what works" in their experience, not on what God has said. Because of their thoughtfulness and caution they often seem to be good decision-makers. However, until they actively search out what God says in the Bible about their decision, they are not biblical decision makers.

2) Mystical approaches. Many Christians live under the misperception that good decisions are based on continually obtaining special messages from God. Popular methods include:

i) Lucky-dipping. The person dips into the Bible at random until he finds a verse or phrase that, irrespective of the context, he arbitrarily decides is a message from God about his situation.

ii) Seeking peace. Although no text of Scripture teaches it, the person assumes that God communicates His will through a sense of inner calm.

iii) Interpreting circumstances. If circumstances make a decision convenient or easy, the decision must be God's will. Conversely, if circumstances make a decision difficult, it must not be God's will. But is the easy decision always the right one, and the hard decision always the wrong one?

iv) Looking for signs. God covertly reveals what decision to make through a unique event or through a series of coincidences. However, since it is impossible to verify if God actually intended those coincidences to be a secret message, and since the circumstances are open to a variety of readings, all such interpretations are completely arbitrary. I should say one more thing about sign reading. One of the most popular ways of seeking a sign is "putting out a fleece." This terminology comes from Gideon's actions in Judges 6. Gideon asked God to do a miracle—dry grass, wet fleece; wet grass, dry fleece—to prove that He would keep His word to protect Israel. "Putting out a fleece" is a demand that God do a miracle (i.e., intervene in some special way) to indicate which decision to make. Unfortunately, those who "put out fleeces" haven't read the Judges 6 account very closely. As is often the case with behaviour in the narrative sections of the Old Testament, Judges 6 is a report

of what Gideon did. It's not necessarily included in scripture for the purpose of imitation. In fact, Gideon's fleece routine was motivated by doubt. Gideon didn't believe God would keep His word until God did a miracle to prove it. Gideon's fleece-laying is no more to be imitated as a decision-making method than Saul's seeking out of the witch of Endor (1 Samuel 28:7ff.).

v) God told me. Internal impressions, whose source is unverifiable, are erroneously called prophecies and elevated to the status of divine messages (see Jeremiah 23:16–36).

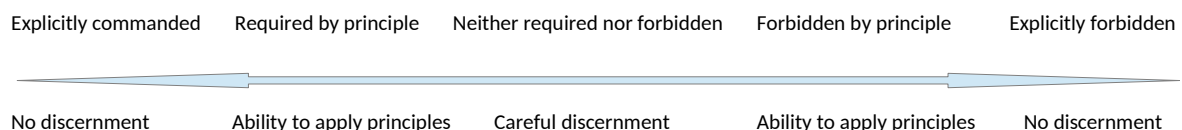
Is it God's will to "find" God's will?

God's revealed will is contained in the commands of the Bible and in the Bible's prophecies about the future. However, God's will for daily decisions is unrevealed (Prov 16:9; 19:21; 20:24), and the Bible gives Christians no technique for discovering God's plans in advance. In fact, God specifically said not to look for His unrevealed will for daily life (Deut 29:29). Not surprisingly, the apostles always speak of God's plan for the future daily events of their lives as unknowable (Rom 1:9-10; 15:30-32; Acts 18:20-21; 1 Cor 4:18-19; James 4:13-15).

Eight principles for making wise, God-honouring decisions

- 1) Search God's Word for precepts, principles or wisdom that apply to the decision.

Spectrum of information from Scripture



i) Does the Bible speak directly to the decision? If God has commanded or forbidden something in His Word, then it is never His will to do something else (Prov 21:30).

ii) Does the Bible speak indirectly to the decision through principles? The Bible may not directly address a specific decision, but inevitably it contains principles that comment on the *motives, goals, and consequences* of a decision (Ps 119:24, 105).

. A principle is a moral generalization. It represents an obligation, either positively or negatively. It does not, however, define the specific circumstances under which the obligation applies.

In order to apply the principle, one must have a warrant. The warrant is what connects the generalization (the principle) to the specific act that is in view.

The warrant rests upon some information that may be supplied outside of Scripture.

Information that comes from outside of Scripture must be evaluated according to the canons of right thinking.

lii. Does the Bible speak neither for or against it by command or principle? Careful discernment of meaning is needed for each individual case. What is permissible in general is not necessarily good or useful in the instance. Consider how Paul explains how eating food consecrated to idols is permissible in one situation, but not in another (1 Cor 10). When

evaluating the meaning of something not explicitly described in Scripture, ask the following questions about meaning:

1. What do people say it means?
2. How do people use it?
3. Who or what is associated with it?
4. Does it have an intrinsic meaning?

2) Pray for wisdom, not signs (Prov 2:6-8; 16:3). Don't pray for inner peace or dramatic coincidences that will relieve you of the responsibility of making a decision. Rather, pray for the wisdom to make a sensible, biblical decision. Even for King Solomon, who had genuine prophetic revelation available to him, the key to making good decisions was wisdom, not perpetual divine revelation (1 Kings 3:5-10).

- 3) Consider your duties and obligations.
 - 4) Gather information. This can be done by research.
 - 5) Seeking counsel from wise, experienced, spiritually minded people. Proverbs loves careful, thought through, informed decision-making (Prov 13:16; 21:5; 14:15; 15:22; 12:15).
 - 6) Consider circumstances.
 - 7) Be aware of your conscience and a sense of peace.
 - 8) All other things being equal, do what you want. If the biblical considerations and the practical concerns end in a dead heat between two or more options, then do what you want.
- There is no biblical obligation to "find" God's unrevealed will before you make a decision.

When decisions go wrong

- 1) Review your process and learn from your mistakes: Did you overlook a biblical principle? Was there information you didn't have? Were you led by a selfish motive? Evaluate, and then make a good second decision.
- 2) Trust God's sovereignty (Prov 3:5-6; James 1:2-4). God is not defeated by our bad decisions. In fact, many of His most important lessons in our lives can be learned only through failure.