

Making Difficult Decisions

To live is to make decisions. We all know that. Some of those decisions are as simple as deciding whether to have French or Italian dressing on a salad. But other decisions like whether to get married, change a job, move to another part of the country, or go back to school, are tougher. They are complex, involve other people, and have life changing impact. Aristotle wrote, "It is hard at times to decide what sort of thing one should choose--and still harder to abide by one's decision."

Some decision making may be linked to your personality. Some people, for example, are risk-takers who make decisions quickly and are willing to abide by the consequences. Others are more insecure, hesitant people who fear making mistakes, want to be sure before making any commitments and, as a result, avoid making decisions for as long as possible.

There can be several reasons why people have difficulty making decisions. Sometimes we are afraid of making the wrong choice or making a decision that might not be pleasing to God. At times, we don't have enough information to make a wise decision. At other times, we may be overwhelmed with all of the possible outcomes of a decision, so we delay taking action. The problem of deciding is compounded when the decision maker is given conflicting advice by equally respected people. As a result, we struggle for a long time and don't take action. There is no more miserable human being than the one in whom nothing is habitual but indecision, according to psychologist William James.

Ask Yourself Some Questions

Making difficult decisions is never easy but the Christian begins with an awareness that God is the only ultimate source and giver of wisdom (Prov. 2:6). He will give wisdom to those who seek his guidance (Prov. 3:5-6, 4:11, Ps. 32:8). For this reason, prayer and knowledge of the Scriptures are crucial for decision makers and their counselors.

A simple, helpful approach to decision making involves dividing a page of paper into columns, one for each of the alternatives, then listing the pros and cons for each decision in the appropriate column. This puts the issues in front of the decision maker and helps clarify the alternatives.

Questions such as the following can also help. Consider writing your answers on paper so that they can be added to or consulted again later.

1. Is each alternative consistent with Biblical teaching and likely to honor Christ?
2. Are the alternatives consistent with my life goals?
3. Which alternative makes the best use of my abilities, past experiences, interests, training, and spiritual gifts?
4. What do other people (who are in a position to know) think about each alternative?
5. Is each alternative feasible in terms of my time, finances, schedule, energy, etc.?
6. How (if at all) will my marriage and family be influenced by the decision?
7. How (if at all) will my career and work be influenced by my decision?
8. How (if at all) will my spiritual life be influenced by the decision?
9. What are the advantages and disadvantages of each alternative?
10. Do I have any inner feelings about what should be done?
11. Are there good reasons for delaying this decision temporarily? Some decisions, such as the decision to get married or to change one's career, are best made after taking the time to deliberate carefully. A delay in making decisions doesn't always mean you're procrastinating.

And what if you answer all these questions but still don't know what to do? Consider taking a tentative step in one direction. Just as it is easiest to steer a vehicle that is moving, so God may make his guidance felt when we take tentative steps in whatever direction we think might be best.

What About God's Will?

Seeking and finding God's will is a special concern for Christians. In seeking to determine God's will, ask yourself the following questions.

1. Do I really want and expect God's leading? If the answer is no, then spend time in prayer and discussion with a Christian friend or counselor who can help you evaluate why these issues are obstacles.
2. What information do the Scriptures give that could help in the decision?
3. Have I evaluated the alternatives and acquired useful information to help my decision making?
4. What opportunities are available to me (open and closed doors)?

5. What are the opinions of others who know me and/or who know enough about the situation to give an evaluation? Try to seek guidance from people whom you respect and trust.

When Jesus chose the 12 apostles (Luke 6:12-26), he took the decision seriously, spent a whole night in prayer before making the choice, and selected the 12 from among those whom he had been observing. Once he made the selection, he stuck with it, even though the disciples were slow learners and one was a traitor.

The Bible has many references to God's guidance and willingness to give wisdom. See, for example, Psalms 23:3; 25:4-5, 8-12, 32:8; 43:3; Proverbs 3:5-6; and James 1:5. Sometimes decision making is difficult, but God does not want us to be confused or misled. He is trustworthy, able to calm our fears, and willing to guide us as we make the difficult decisions of life.

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