

“Christian Decision-Making” Prov. 3:5; James 1:5; I Cor. 16:5-7 2/27/19

In David Brooks’ recent book, The Road to Character, he reflects on a theme sounded by many commencement speakers. Such speakers often give advice to new graduates about how to make the major life decisions that confront them. In Brooks’ words, the speakers “tell graduates to follow their passion, to trust their feelings, to reflect, and find their purpose in life. The assumption behind these clichés is that when you are figuring out how to lead your life, the most important answers are found deep inside yourself.... You should...sit down and take some time to discover yourself, to define what is really important to you, what your priorities are, and what arouses your deepest passions.” And that sounds like pretty good advice to affluent Americans who place a real premium on individual autonomy and self-sufficiency.

But what if there were a God who created the world and each individual in it? And what if that God had a plan for redeeming this fallen world, and a role for each person to play in that plan? And what if the gifts and abilities God gave each person were given to be used, not for personal gratification and enrichment, but to further God’s plan for the world? If so, the “wisdom” of commencement speakers would be limited at best, and could mislead young graduates into making poor choices at worst.

So, how do Christians make major life-decisions? What factors should we consider? How do we discern what God's plan is for us? And, how do we know if we're making the right choice? There have been lots of different answers given to these questions over the centuries, but they usually fall into one of two broad categories.

First, evangelical and mystical Christians emphasize the priority of having a "personal relationship with Jesus Christ." They therefore expect that Christ will reveal the specifics of God's plan for our lives to us in some way- especially the big decisions like who to marry, what college to attend, what career to pursue, or what job to take. How does God communicate his plan to us? These folks have a variety of responses to that question, believing that God communicates his will for us through signs, circumstances, inner voices, and a sense of peace when the correct decision is reached.

Many Gospel hymns, written in the late 1800's reflect this point of view. Consider popular hymns like "He Leadeth Me," "Precious Lord, Take My Hand," and "All the Way My Savior Leads Me," or the more contemporary "Step by Step." All of them assume that Jesus directly leads us, and our job is to follow his leading.

The Bible seems to support this point of view. Consider biblical heroes like Moses, Gideon, and Paul. God clearly told them what they

were to do. Although they sometimes resisted it, their job was to simply follow what God revealed to them. Or, consider these verses from Proverbs 3, "*Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight*" (or "*He will direct your paths.*") (Prov. 3:5)

This was the point of view that I learned in my church growing up. I heard many stories in which the storyteller told of being led by God through an unusual circumstance or unlikely coincidence or even through a seemingly random verse of Scripture they stumbled upon.

So, when I was ready to graduate from college and get married, and I faced a choice of three different job offers, I assumed that God would reveal to me which job to take! I was honestly willing to take any of them; I just wanted God to tell me which one! In time, I eliminated one job, because it would have required traveling with a Christian band, and that didn't seem like a good way to start out a new marriage! But I was still left with two church jobs- one in Racine, Wisconsin and the other in Daytona Beach, Florida. Both seemed like good opportunities for me. I prayed and talked with Christian friends and mentors. I read the Bible regularly. And I waited for some guidance from God. Nothing came. The church in Daytona, thinking I was holding out for more money, raised their offer! Still, nothing from God. This was very disturbing to me as it ran counter to

everything I had been taught about God's guidance. Finally, I had to make a choice. I reasoned that if God wasn't giving me any specific direction, I must be free to make my own decision. And seemed to me that doing youth ministry in Daytona Beach would be a lot more fun than doing it in Racine, Wisconsin. So I took the job in Florida!

My experience exposed some of the weaknesses of this approach to Christian decision-making. For one, sometimes, try as we might, we don't receive any guidance! But there are other problems with this approach. When our kids were young, we got a little Cocker Spaniel named "Chester." Chester was a nice dog, but not the brightest bulb in the chandelier. One day I was in the house and I heard someone out in the yard calling, "Chester! Chester!" I looked out the window to see who it was but saw no one. Chester was running frantically around the yard trying to figure out who was calling him, but no one was there. After several minutes of watching this comedy, I figured it out. Our neighbors had a macaw that obviously had heard us calling Chester many times, and now was sitting in his cage by the window calling our dog! After I was done laughing, I finally took pity and brought poor Chester in. If I hadn't, I think he'd still be out there trying to figure out who was calling him!

Perhaps you can figure out where I'm going with this. If we are expecting God to guide our decisions through some kind of inner voice,

how do we discern who or what is really calling us? Is it God? Is it our own desires, perhaps desires that we haven't even identified within ourselves? Is it some kind of psychological blind spot that is drawing us in a particular direction? This approach to "hearing" God's guidance is very subjective, with its emphasis on inner feelings and interpreting circumstances. It is very easy to mistake something else for God's leading, potentially leading us to disastrous decisions. So, given these dangers, is there another way that takes God's call and plan for our lives seriously but avoids these pitfalls? I'm glad you asked that question, because I believe there is!

Rather than expecting that God will provide us with some kind of inner leading or sign when we face major decisions, this second approach relies on the biblical virtue of wisdom. James says, "*If any of you is lacking in wisdom, ask God, who gives to all generously and ungrudgingly, and it will be given you.*" (James 1:5) Whole chapters in the book of Proverbs are devoted to the importance of seeking wisdom. And, Jesus' parable about stewardship- about money being entrusted to three different servants who are then held accountable for how they manage that money- that parable is predicated on the servants making wise decisions, not trying to discern hidden messages from the master!

In addition, this wisdom-approach takes into account the gifts and abilities God has given us, but goes beyond that to consider God's work in

the world. As writer Frederick Buechner put it, “*The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.*” (repeat) Our job is to figure out where our deep gladness lies and where it intersects with God’s work in the world.

But what about those Bible passages where God tells people what to do and where to go? First of all, those passages are rare. And they almost always happen at a critical time in God’s work with humanity. In fact, I believe they are recorded in the Bible precisely because they are so unusual! Second, there are many other passages where biblical characters aren’t at all sure what God intends for them to do. Read the book of Acts and Paul’s letters, and you’ll find this happening frequently. Here’s an example from the end of Paul’s first letter to the church in Corinth. “⁵*I will visit you after passing through Macedonia—for I intend to pass through Macedonia—*⁶*and perhaps I will stay with you or even spend the winter, so that you may send me on my way, wherever I go.* ⁷*I do not want to see you now just in passing, for I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits.* (I Cor. 16:5-7) Notice the tentative words like “intend,” “perhaps,” “I hope,” and “if the Lord permits.” God had clearly not revealed to Paul what was coming next.

Scripture is important to us in wisdom-based Christian decision-making, in that it tells us what is important to God for human life and what

pitfalls to avoid. But it isn't going to tell us whether to marry George or Seymour, or whether to become a plumber or a brain surgeon. God gives us freedom to make those choices, instructing us to choose wisely. And, if God needs to communicate something specific to us, God will do so in unmistakable ways, just as he did in those biblical stories- appearing to Moses in a burning bush, or by knocking Paul off his horse and blinding him!

Keep in mind that we're not alone in making our decisions. God often uses the community of faith to help us make wise choices. Francis of Assisi once faced a critically important choice. Should he continue in his vocation of quiet prayer and meditation, or should he enter into a public ministry of preaching, especially to those outside the faith? He couldn't discern what God would have him do. So he contacted two mature Christian friends, Sister Clare and Brother Silvester, and asked them independently to pray about this and then report back to him. Both of them came to the same conclusion- that Francis' gifts suited him best for a ministry of preaching. The rest, as they say, is history! So, when you are facing a difficult decision, ask for the counsel of Christian friends, elders, or pastors.

Finally, don't forget to pray about your decisions. James tells us to ask God for wisdom. So ask! And with the knowledge of your abilities,

gifts, and passions, with an eye toward how you can be part of God's work in the world, having sought out the counsel of others, and prayed some more, go ahead and make the best decision you can, knowing God can head you off if it's important for God to do so. I think that's how Christian decision-making usually works.