

808 How Can I Decide?

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God's Answers to Life's Questions

Decisions, decisions! Hardly a day goes by that we don't have to make decisions about one thing or another. Having a spiritual standard you can rely on helps greatly in making moral and life decisions. How do you make your decisions? Would you like to make better decisions? Today we're asking the question, "How Can I Decide?" There are so many questions today about right and wrong. Those who love God want to do right, but often find it hard to decide. We must realize that people are not right in their actions merely because they think they are. Solomon said, "There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death" (Prov. 14:12). People frequently like to say, "I can't see any harm in it"; but this by itself doesn't make it right to do. Nor are people right simply because someone who is an assumed authority thinks so. Nor are people right simply because they feel a course of action will bring about the most satisfying outcome. Proverbs 14:15 says, "The simple believes everything, but the prudent gives thought to his steps." Right and wrong are determined by the teaching and laws of God, which is the only trustworthy standard.

The book of Proverbs is written by a father to his son to give him wisdom and instruction. This wisdom will be more valuable to him than riches; it will bring him protection and long life. God's wisdom leads to prudence and discretion. Dear reader, carefully consider Proverbs chapters 1-4. Here a father makes his case for God's wisdom and instruction. Wisdom is the opposite of naivety, foolishness, and scoffing. Solomon didn't want his son falling into the wrong crowd and making decisions that would ruin his life. Solomon said, "The prudent sees the evil and hides himself, but the naive go on, and are punished for it" (Prov. 22:3). A fool in God's eyes is the person who does not know God or take God seriously enough to do his will.

Solomon warned: "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight. For by me your days will be multiplied, and years will be added to your life. If you are wise, you are wise for yourself; if you scoff, you alone will bear it" (Prov. 9:10-12). Christians should search for God's wisdom like silver or hidden treasures, because it is so valuable (Prov. 2:4). Solomon realized that one cannot play with sin and not be hurt by it. He asked, "Can a man take fire in his bosom and his clothes not be burned? Or can a man walk on hot coals and his feet not be scorched?" (Prov. 6:27-28). Christians who foolishly give the smallest opportunity to the devil in their lives usually find themselves overcome by sin (Eph. 4:26). Do not be deceived: "Bad company ruins good morals" (1 Cor. 15:33).

Jeremiah provides an excellent description of a fool: "For my people are foolish; they know me not; they are stupid children; they have no understanding. They are 'wise'—in doing evil! But how to do good they know not" (Jer. 4:22). The wisdom of God begins with knowing God. To know God is to know his holiness, his love, and his justice. The "stupid" have no understanding, because they do not want it. They may have worldly wisdom and know how to work evil, but they are naive of righteousness. Some foolish people live their lives never considering they will give an account for their actions on the day of judgment. God called the wealthy but selfish farmer a fool, because he had laid up treasures for himself but was not rich toward God (Lk. 12:15-21). He followed the riches that cannot follow him beyond this life.

James distinguishes the wisdom of the world from the wisdom that comes from heaven. James said, Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly,

unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace (Jas. 3:13-18). Worldly wisdom is entirely selfish; it produces chaos and wickedness. Wise Christians choose purity, peace, gentleness, and reasonableness. Their nature is to be compassionate and full of good works; they will be wholehearted and without hypocrisy. What they do makes for peace and brings about a harvest of righteousness. Both God and man love a peacemaker.

At this point I want to ask some practical questions that I believe will help you in making everyday decisions. Each question is important so listen closely. *Does the Bible instruct or approve of this principle or practice, or is it forbidden by the Word of God?* Christians should do what God instructs, whether they like it or not and whether they agree with God or not. God expects his people to be faithful to his will, even when they do not understand why he teaches it. Christians should trust God enough to stay away from the things God forbids as sinful. The Bible teaches, "But test everything; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil" (1 Th. 5:21-22). Jesus used the Word of God to fight against the devil. So should we. If we want to do what is right, the best thing we can do is study God's word daily and practice what it says.

Am I trying to find a way around God's will? Am I trying to excuse a behavior or attitude that God has forbidden? Or am I trying to act according to human counsel, which lies beyond the counsel of God? Abraham, on Sarah's advice, sought a way to have an heir by Sarah's handmaid Hagar. Abraham's presumptuous behavior has led to severe strife for thousands of years. Man's ways are not God's ways (Isa. 55:8-9). When man in neglect to God's will seeks to find his own way to accomplish his goal, he will find that abandoning God leads to disaster. Some folks who live immoral lives try desperately to justify their sin. One excuse is, "Jesus wants me to be happy." The assumption is that their desire makes them happy and Jesus wants them to be happy, so Jesus approves of what they are doing.

A man or woman who uses this excuse to cheat on a spouse or to divorce and remarry someone else is only fooling himself. Jesus wants people to honor their wedding vows. Someone objects that Jesus wants them to be happy. Yes, Jesus wants us to be happy; but happiness is a by-product of righteous living. The Lord Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied" (Matthew 5:6). Jesus calls "happy" or "blessed" those who want righteousness as badly as they want to eat food or drink water. Happiness and righteousness go hand in hand. God does not will for people to find their pleasure in sin (Gal. 5:13-16).

Will this course of action or principle seem honorable to me or will it offend my conscience? We must act in good faith and with a clear conscience. "But whoever has doubts is condemned if he eats, because the eating is not from faith. For whatever does not proceed from faith is sin" (Rom. 14:23). If you violate your conscience by doubting whether what you are doing is right, you have sinned against yourself and, more importantly, against God. *How will this principle or action affect others?* Christ said, "So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets" (Mt. 7:12). Demanding my rights may well rob another of his rights. Christians should consider others as more important than themselves and look out for the interests of others (Phil. 2:3-4). All Christians should strive to be an example of the believer in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, and in purity (1 Tim. 4:12).

Will this behavior lead others into sin or to stumble? People who assume they can handle temptation often lose sight of those who are weaker and cannot handle the same temptation. The apostle instructed, "It is good not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that causes your brother to stumble" (Rom. 14:13, 21). A stumbling block is a lure into sin and perhaps falling away from God. Even if one could drink alcohol and not get drunk, what kind of influence would such behavior be on others who are weak? *How will this attitude or behavior affect me?* Will it bring me closer to God or push me further away? Will this make me healthier physically and spiritually or is it unhealthy? Since the physical body of a Christian is "a temple of the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 6:19), Christians ought to take care of their bodies. Any behavior that intentionally harms the body violates God's will.

Will this activity keep me from doing what is good and right? Christians should cast aside every encumbrance that entangles their feet in the Christian race (Heb. 12:1-2). Sometimes things are not morally wrong in and of themselves but distract and tie up Christians, keeping them from doing God's will. Some hobbies and habits are like thorns that keep the Christian from producing any fruit for the Lord (Lk. 8:14). They don't have time to follow God, because they are so busy with their day to day activities. Christians must be careful not to let the cares and worries of the world weigh them down (Lk. 21:34).

Would people I respect look down on me if they knew that I am participating in this event or behavior? Not everything done in secret is wrong, but secrecy often provides a cloak for evil. Jesus said, "For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his deeds should be exposed. But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been carried out in God" (Jn. 3:20-21). If people knew, would this attitude or behavior bring discredit or dishonor to God, to the church, or to my family? Eye-service whether to employers or to the church is hypocrisy and fails to please God (Col. 3:22). The eyes of the Lord are in every place, keeping watch on the good and the evil (Prov. 15:3).

Would I respect others I love, if they were to participate in this event or activity? What if everyone began doing what I'm doing? Would the world be a better, holier, more spiritual place? Would I respect parents, preachers, and elders more for doing this activity? If I wouldn't respect them for making this decision, I probably won't respect myself for making it. In that case, it's better to do what I can respect. *Will this event or behavior glorify God?* Christians are urged to do all things to the glory of God (1 Cor. 10:31). While we celebrate with those who are victorious, we cannot see how winning the lottery by gambling glorifies God. Nor can we see how participating in athletic activities where participants are scantily or embarrassingly dressed glorifies God. Christians must be careful not to send a mixed message of joy over something that fails to live up to the holy life God desires for us.

Can I pray and ask God to bless this decision? Christians should make no decision without fervent prayer. Jesus prayed all night before he selected the twelve apostles (Lk. 6:12-16). If a person cannot ask God to bless his decision, he should not follow that course. Many people make their decision first and then ask God to bless it. Faithful Christians ask for God's help in making the decision. When faced with trials, Christians should ask God for wisdom to make the right decision. The Bible says in James 1:5-8, "If

any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways."

What would Jesus do? Jesus, after all, as the Son of God and a perfectly sinless person, is the standard of all right and wrong. Jesus is the true example of love. He said in John 13:34, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another." If everyone loved each other the way Jesus loved, we'd have a very different world. People would give of themselves rather than be selfish. People would forgive others rather than hold grudges. Jesus is the true example of righteousness. He never trampled on others to make a name for himself. He spoke the truth, even when people didn't want to hear it. He walked seventy-five miles from Nazareth to the Jordan River to be baptized in order to fulfill all righteousness. When the devil tempted him, Jesus turned to the Word of God and said, "It stands written." Jesus knew that God's Word was always right. He stood by the Bible. Jesus didn't want to face the pain of crucifixion, but he did what the Father commanded rather than what he wanted. Jesus did what was right, and I pray that is what you too will do.

Many people fail God not by doing the wrong thing but by failing to do what is right. "So whoever knows the right thing to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin" (Jas. 4:17). For instance, failure to believe that Jesus is the Christ will cause a person to die in His sins (John 8:24). Failure to repent will cause one to perish eternally (Lk. 13:3, 5; II Pet. 3:9). Failure to obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus will bring the vengeance of God and eternal destruction (II Th. 1:7-9). Failure to be baptized [or being born of water and the Spirit] means that you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven (John 3:5). Failure to minister to the needs of others will bring about eternal punishment (Mt. 25:31-46).

Failure to do what is right says to God, to the church, and to the world that one does not care whether one pleases God or not. The Lord Jesus said that he always does what is pleasing to the Father (John 8:29). Our task in life is to love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength (Mk. 12:30). Failing to prepare our spiritual lamps is foolish (Mt. 25:13), hiding our talents is wicked (Mt. 25:14-30), and failing to serve others in need (Mt. 25:31-46) shows that we do not have the kind of relationship with God that he desires.

Christians should long to appear before God bearing fruit. The Lord taught, "By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love" (Jn 15:8-10). The faithful Christian desires to keep himself in the love of God (Jude 21) by serving him and reaching out to the lost day by day with the gospel. Let us set our hearts upon serving God and doing his will. Only with such love and devotion can we glorify his name and live as lights in a dark world. Serving God means making wise choices morally and practically. The mature Christian has his "powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil" (Heb. 5:14). May each of us so train our hearts and spirits that we too may refrain from evil and practice good.

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