

Decisions, Decisions  
Proverbs 3:1-12

I have to confess, I have a very difficult time making decisions. Oh, it's easy enough to decide what to do if the variables all point in one direction. It's obvious that setting up a meth lab in the attic of the manse would be a dumb idea. Meth is, after all, one of the most horrible substances ever dreamed up by the mind of man, as deadly as it is addictive. Making and selling it would plumb the depths of human depravity. Besides, I'm told that the smell would alert the neighbors, and the police chief lives two doors down.

It's also easy to make decisions when the preponderance of the evidence points in one direction. Smoking may look cool and nicotine may give you a buzz, but when this cyclist weighs that against the risk of lung cancer, loss of aerobic capacity, reduced appetite, and the sky-high cost of cigarettes it doesn't make much sense. For me, that's an easy choice to make.

But what do you do when the choice isn't so obvious? What do you do when you have to choose between two good things?

This is the place where our senior cadets find themselves. There are so many ways in which these talented young people can serve God. The world has so many pressing needs. Should they engage in more career preparation by going to vocational school or college? If so, which school should they attend? Should they go into military service? Which branch? Should they select a career and start working right away? To which company should they apply? There are no right or wrong answers to any of these questions. How can anyone make a decision?

But decisions don't get easier just because you have lived a bit longer. To be sure, some decisions we have already made place limits on our future choices – once you've married, you've made a lifelong commitment to one person, after all. And the longer you go down life's road, the harder it is to make some career moves – at my age, I couldn't become a military chaplain even if I had the inclination.

But we never stop having choices to make, and the longer we live, the more painful they become. How can we best care for aging parents? Does there come a time when we need a smaller, more manageable home? No one likes to think about these things, but the time comes when decisions simply must be made.

In the light of recent changes to the polity of the Presbyterian Church, especially where it comes to our ordination standards, this congregation also has a choice to make. Should we stay in the PCUSA and keep fighting for Biblical purity? That's what Steve Puryear said First Canton

was planning to do. Should we seek fellowship among others who more clearly share our views? If so, which of the myriad of denominations would be the best fit? How can we know what is the right thing to do?

At this point, the CHA Cadets have a bit of advantage, for the answer literally stares them in the face each week. Emblazoned above the proscenium in the Academy's auditorium is verse 6 of today's passage – "In all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct thy paths." God is the one, the only One to whom we should look for guidance, no matter how great or small the decision is that faces us. If we acknowledge Him, He will direct us in the path that we should take.

Ah, but what exactly does it mean to acknowledge God? At its most basic level it means that we should be theists, recognizing that God exists and that He made everyone and everything that we see around us. Moreover, acknowledging God means that we should be Christians, accepting that Jesus is the image of the invisible God, and thus that when we have seen Jesus we have seen the Father. And it means that we should bow the knee to Jesus as the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords into Whose hands all power in Heaven and on Earth has been delivered.

But how does knowing all that help us make our daily decisions? How do we know what King Jesus wants us to do in the particular situation in which we find ourselves? How do we make the particular choice that is facing us today, right now?

Well, verses 5 and 7 tell us in the first place what it does not mean. We must not lean on our own understanding. We must not be wise in our own eyes. Simply put, that means we must not rely only on what agrees with our experience, on what makes sense to us.

And why is that? Because we are limited. None of us really knows the extent of our capacities. None of us really understands our limitations. And none of us has a comprehensive grasp of the problems and the needs in the world around us. The little bit that we do know can skew our decision making in dramatic ways. It would be wrong, for example, for me to assume that all couples will eventually divorce simply because that's why my parents did. I may not be able to follow their model of marriage, but that doesn't mean good models don't exist. It just means those models are outside my limited experience.

But a more important reason that none of us should use our own reason as our ultimate guide of life is because we are all sinful. To put it simply, sin has twisted every part of every human being. And even after we are saved by the grace of Christ, the untwisting process, the process of becoming more and more like Him is a gradual one. That means that, to a greater or

lesser extent, every Christian's mind continues to be warped by sin. As I like to say to my Bible classes, because of sin we've all got brain damage.

How, then, could we brain-damaged people possibly expect ourselves to analyze accurately the decisions that are placed before us? We've all caught ourselves engaging in rationalization, justifying obviously bad choices. How much more should we expect sin to infect choices which are much less obvious? No, we dare not lean on our own understanding. For if we are wise in our own eyes, chances are we are on the wrong track.

So, how can we make good decisions? How do we acknowledge God when we have a choice to make? Verse 1 tells us that we should not forget God's law, but we should remember what we have been taught by it. Verse 3 says that we should not forsake truth, but that we should wear it like a necklace so that it goes with us wherever we go.

In short, we must always make decisions in the context of truth, the truth we find in the Scriptures, the truth most clearly expressed in the Person and Work of Jesus Christ. Of course this means that we should reject any choice that goes against the clear teaching of the Bible. Of course we defer to the Scriptures where it comes even to the most sensitive of topics – on how men and women relate to each other for example.

But that also means we must keep Scriptural principals in mind when we have less obvious choices to make. And what did Jesus tell us is the essence, the summary of all the Law and the Prophets? That we must love the Lord our God with all our heart and soul and mind and that we must love our neighbors as much as and in the same way that we love ourselves. The Scriptures are thus primarily relational in focus, and we must place our relationships with God and with others as our top priorities.

Solomon tells us basically the same thing in verse 3. The word that the King James translates as mercy actually means faithful, covenant love, and it is the word the Old Testament uses to describe the way that God is determined to be in relationship with His people. Jesus and Solomon are thus both telling us that truth and love cannot be separated, that to follow God's Law is to be in determined relationship with God and with others. We must hold love and truth close to us, writing them on the very tablet of our hearts.

Does this help us when we are making decisions? It should keep before us what is really important, and thus what should be our top priority. Should I spend that money I have been saving on something nice for myself, or should I give it away so that God's Word can be spread and so that God's work will be done in the world? Verse 9 tells us that one of the ways we put God first in

our lives is to give Him our firstfruits, not our leftovers. How different will our spending decisions be if God and God's people are ahead of ourselves on our priority list?

Or let's say I have a chance to get a job that will help me make more money. But if I take that job I will have less time for my family. How can I make covenant love for my family my top priority? But in this present economy, how can I afford not to take the job and the raise?

Look again at verse 5 – where it comes to making decisions, above all things we must trust the Lord. We must trust God's truth and we must trust God's love, no matter what makes sense to us. And the way we express that trust always involves obedience to God's revealed will. Verse 1 tells us that we must not only know God's commandments, but that we must keep them – that means we must put them into practice in our lives. Verse 7 says that we must depart from evil, turning away from whatever is contrary to God's will, from whatever goes against God's law of perfect love for Him and for others.

And the Scripture does not promise us that doing things God's way will be easy. In fact, verses 11 and 12 tell us precisely the opposite thing – that God often expresses His love for us by correcting us, chastening us, disciplining us. Sometimes God's grace is shown to us by bringing us to those crisis points in our lives where we are forced to lay aside those things or habits to which we have paid too much attention. Sometimes God brings us to the point where we have to make a decision that will get our priorities back in the right order, that will help us more consistently follow God's law of love.

Crisis is never pleasant, and whenever we have to let go of something that has become an idol to us it involves pain. But we can be sure that God brings us to these painful moments because He loves us, as verse 12 says. In fact, God delights in all His people just as a good father shows delight in his children.

And we must remember that when we trust God and when we seek to follow His law of love, putting Him first in our lives, when we acknowledge Him and seek His will whenever we have decisions to make, that God's blessings will ultimately follow. God does not give us His law of love in order to ruin our lives or to spoil our fun, but so that we might be blessed and so that we might be a blessing to others.

Just look at all the blessings God promises in this passage to those who trust in Him. In verse 2, we are reminded that following God's law will bring us long life and will bring us peace. In verse 4, we are reminded that those who embrace truth and love will find favor with God and also with other people. In verse 8, we are told that turning away from evil will bring us better health. In

verse 10 we are told that those who put God first where it comes to our possessions will, in the end, have more wealth.

Yes, it's strange but true. If we devote ourselves to having longer, healthier lives, and to being popular, and to being rich – if those things are our goal, we will never achieve them. But if we trust God and seek to do His will and really consider Him and other people as more important than ourselves, we will end up having all the blessings that we could desire, and more. And Jesus said the same thing, didn't He? "Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you."

So, let's seek God first. Let's trust in the Lord Who loves us and delights in us and has given us His Law of truth and love for our good. Let's seek God's will whenever we have decisions to make. And we can be certain that He will do what He promises. He will direct our paths.