

## **Introduction**

I'd like to begin by asking you two questions. First, why are you and I the way we are? Second, why are your life and mine the way they are? The answer to those questions is a complex one. But there's one factor as much as any other that determines the persons we are and the lives we live. That factor is the decisions we make. You don't have to take my word for it. You can take Solomon's in Ecclesiastes 10:1-2.

## **Life as Decisions**

Let's start with verse 2 and the Hebrew word translated "**heart**." That word has several different meanings depending on the context in which it occurs. Here it means the mind and its thought processes.

Notice in verse 2 what the mind does. It "**directs**" us. We routinely say and do things because we think about and choose to say and do them. We decide in other words. You decided to come to church. Those who aren't here decided not to come. Or this afternoon, some of you will decide to take a jog. Others of you will decide to take a nap. Or look at the spouse sitting next to you if you have one. That spouse is the result of a decision you made years ago. Or tomorrow morning, many of you will go to an office or factory or job site to work there. You will as the result of a decision you made years ago. The point is that our minds routinely direct us. Our lives are essentially an endless series of decisions, big and small, that we have made and will make.

## **The Nature of Decisions**

In verse 2, Solomon tells us what those decisions are about. Notice to what our minds direct us – either the right or the left. The right and left sides here are clearly symbolic. They represent something else.

Two passages in the Bible reveal what that is. The first is Genesis 48:8-22. In Hebrew culture, fathers gave their elder sons the greater

blessing and their younger sons the lesser. They expressed that by placing their right hands on the elder and their left hands on the younger when they blessed them. The second passage is Matthew 25:31-46. Jesus uses the right and left sides to represent two contrasting verdicts. At judgment, the sheep, who get rewarded, are on the right. The goats, who get punished, are on the left.

Those texts teach us what the right and left sides symbolize in Ecclesiastes 10:2. Most decisively, the right represents what is good (moral) and the left what is bad (immoral). Less decisively, the right represents what is more valuable and the left what is less valuable.

That means that many of the decisions we make are about what is moral and immoral. Someone wrongs you. Will you retaliate or forgive? Your boyfriend pressures you to have sex with him. Will you stay chaste or fornicate? Someone shares a juicy piece of gossip. Will you keep it to yourself or pass it on? Someone gives you the answers to an exam. Will you be honest or cheat? All of those decisions are about what is moral and immoral.

But just as many are about what is more valuable and less valuable. Will you buy a used car or a new one? Will you vote for a conservative or a liberal candidate? Will you have or not have chemotherapy treatments? Will you marry or not marry the person you're dating? Will you go or not go to college? Will you retire or not retire? All of those decisions are about what is more valuable and less valuable.

That then is what decisions are about – turning to the right or the left. We choose what is good or what is bad or we choose what is more valuable or what is less valuable.

### **Hinges of Destiny**

Now that we know what decisions are about let's move to verse 1 and the result of making them? In the first part of the verse, Solomon pictures a perfumer who works long and hard to create a sweet smelling oil. But then a couple of flies land in it and die. That in turn ferments

the oil, which ends up making it stink.

The last part of the verse shows that the pre-fermented oil (before flies) represents what wisdom (turning to the right) does. It makes things sweet. It also shows that the fermented oil (after flies) represents what foolishness or turning to the left does. It makes things stink. People sometimes say that life "**stinks.**" That's the idea here.

Verse 1 reveals a fundamental fact of life. Decisions are hinges of destiny. They, as much as anything, define our futures - in two ways.

First, they contribute significantly to the persons we become (our character). We normally think that what we are (the condition of our minds and hearts) determines the decisions we make and that's true. But it's also true that the decisions we make determine what we are. They shape how we think, feel, and will. Listen to the insightful words of C.S. Lewis in his book *Mere Christianity*: "**Every time you make a choice you are turning the central part of you, the part of you that chooses, into something a little different from what it was before. And taking your life as a whole, with all your innumerable choices, all your life long you are slowly turning this central thing into a heavenly creature or into a hellish creature.**"

Do you grasp what he was saying? Almost every decision we make turns us into something different than we were before. To one degree or another, it makes us more heavenly or hellish inside; it makes us a better or worse person. A person I knew backed into a car in a parking lot and didn't report it. His decision made him more hellish inside. Another person I knew returned \$457 a company had mistakenly refunded him. His decision made him more heavenly inside.

So that's one way our decisions define our futures. They contribute significantly to the persons we will become (our character).

A second way is that they contribute significantly to the lives we will live (our circumstances). Will life go poorly or well for us? It depends on the decisions we make. Almost every decision we make makes our circumstances a little or a lot better or worse than they were before.

Robert Schuller shared an instructive insight in that regard: **“Ninety percent of the people who face problems must eventually admit that these problems were the result of a decision they either made or failed to make.”** He was right and we need to be honest about it. If we trace most of our problems back far enough, we’ll end up with a decision or series of decisions we made that caused them. America’s health care crisis illustrates this. As columnist George Will contends, its primary cause is the bad decisions people make with regard to eating, drinking, driving, sex, alcohol, drugs, and smoking. It’s true. It’s usually the decisions we make that cause things to go poorly in our lives.

But the opposite is also true. It’s usually the decisions we make that cause things to go well in our lives. When things go well for us, it’s almost always because of a decision or series of decisions we made. I met a male nurse last week. He had been a blue collar worker in the steel industry but saw the handwriting on the wall. So he went to college and became a Registered Nurse. If he hadn’t decided to do that, he’d be unemployed now. The company he worked for shut down. Because he decided to do that, he’s employed now and making a good living instead.

Even casual thought confirms it. Decisions are hinges of destiny. They’re person and life defining. They fashion our character, what we are like, and our circumstances, what our lives are like.

### **Make Right Decisions**

So make right decisions and don’t make wrong ones. That’s our call in verse 2. Choose what is good (moral) over what is bad (immoral). Or choose what is more valuable over what is less valuable. The issue of course is how we do that. How do we make the right decisions and not make wrong ones? It’s by doing two things.

First, seek divine guidance. Divine guidance is God speaking to us and telling us what to decide. Let me quickly say that He won’t guide us in all the decisions we make. It wouldn’t be good for us if He did. It would stifle us and so He doesn’t do it. But when we have significant

decisions to make and can't know for sure what is good or more valuable, we need to seek guidance from Him.

For what it's worth, my practice is this. When I need guidance, I pray and ask God for it. I ask Him to show or tell me what is good or more valuable. After that, I spend time alone with Him, listening for Him to speak. If He doesn't, I then go about my business with a quiet and inward posture of listening. If He doesn't speak to me within a suitable time, usually a day or so, I assume He wants me to decide myself. So I do just that – decide myself as best as I can.

We make right decisions by doing a second thing. Decide competently. Competence has to do with three fundamental factors that, together, direct almost every decision we make.

One factor is knowledge. Knowledge refers to comprehending the vital facts that are relevant to the decision before us. We must know those facts to decide competently. We can make one or both of two mistakes in that regard. One is misinformation. What we think is so isn't so. The other is lack of information. We aren't aware that what is so is so. Either of those can sabotage the decision making process.

A second factor is values. Values refer to our judgments about the importance of things. We must discern the true value of things to decide competently. We can make one or both of two mistakes in that regard. One is judging things to be more important than they objectively are. The other is judging things to be less important than they objectively are. Either of those can sabotage the decision making process.

A third factor is beliefs. Beliefs refer to the assumptions we have about what is real or true. Those assumptions must be correct ones to decide competently. We can make one or both of two mistakes in that regard. One is assuming something is real or true and it isn't. The other is assuming something isn't real or true and it is. Either of those can sabotage the decision making process.

Those then are the three fundamental factors that direct decision making. To decide competently, therefore, we must do three things.

First, know all the vital facts we possibly can. Second, discern the true value of things. And third, believe what is real and true.

Years ago, I counseled a Christian wife whose husband voluntarily confessed a short-term affair with his secretary. She then had a decision to make – whether or not to divorce him. Her two best friends strongly advised her to divorce him because after all, once a cheat always a cheat. She was inclined to agree. Besides, she'd never be able to trust him again, she thought, and adultery is the Biblical ground for divorce.

I approached her in terms of knowledge, values, and beliefs.

We addressed what she knew. Her husband betrayed her. He was repentant and truly sorry. Divorcing would drastically and detrimentally alter the circumstances of their two minor children.

We also addressed values. The welfare of their two children was more important than her husband's and hers. And God's pleasure and will were more important than anything.

Finally, we addressed beliefs. It isn't true, once a cheater always a cheater. It is true, once a cheater sometimes a cheater. It isn't true that she'd never be able to trust him again. It is true that trust, over time, can be rebuilt on goodness. It's isn't true that adultery is the Biblical ground for divorce. It is true that hard heartedness is.

Let me ask you a question. Taking those facts, values, and beliefs into account and connecting them together with good logic, what should she have decided – divorce him or not divorce him? She turned to the right and chose what was good. She decided not to divorce him.

## **Conclusion**

That illustrates our call in closing. Make right decisions by seeking God's guidance and deciding competently. Why? It's because the decisions we make are person and life defining. As noted leadership expert John Maxwell says it, "**Our decisions determine our destiny**" and he's right. There's no doubt about it. Decisions truly are hinges of destiny.