

Introduction

In 1956, Pauline Phillips took the pen name Abigail Van Buren and began answering people's questions via newspaper, like this one from a woman who signed it **"Stinky's Wife: "What would you do with a man who refuses to use deodorant, seldom bathes, and doesn't even own a toothbrush?"** Abigail's reply was **"Absolutely nothing."** Hers became, as most of you know, one of the most recognized names in America, her staff and her answering 3,000 to 25,000 questions a week addressed to **"Dear Abby."**

Pauline Phillips' success as **"Dear Abby"** reflects a critical aspect of human life generally and our discipleship to Jesus particularly, one that the wise man addresses in the verses we read. Let's examine those and learn what they teach us about having our own personal **"Dear Abby's."**

The Time of Decision

What gives rise to these verses is found in two words they use, **"guidance"** in 11:14 and 20:18 and **"plans"** in 15:22 and 20:18. The need for seeking guidance and making plans occurs in what is called **"the time of decision."** The circumstance before us invites us or even forces us to choose from among several courses of action.

Examples abound. A husband finds out that his wife is having an adulterous affair, confronts her, and she breaks it off. What should he do? A man is offered a job at twice the salary he's making now but that requires moving away from his family and his wife's. What should he do? Parents of a man's fiancé are dominating and smothering. What should he do? The son of Christian parents moves in with his girlfriend. What should they do? A home owner is deeply disturbed by the constant barking of his neighbor's outdoor dog. What should he do?

Times of decision like those can be life defining. Dallas Willard explained insightfully why they can be: **"There (in the moment of decision) the weight of our future clamps down upon our hearts.**

Whatever comes from our choice will be our responsibility, our fault. Good things we have set our hearts on become real only as we choose them. But those things, or those as yet undreamed of, may also be irretrievably lost if our choices are misguided. We may find ourselves stuck with failures and dreadful consequences that must be endured for a lifetime.” He’s right, which is why times of decision are among the loneliest and most difficult moments of life.

Seek Advice

Because they are that, all of us, no matter who we are, need what 11:14 and 20:18 call **“guidance.”** The Hebrew word translated that refers to the tackle of a ship and hence the handling and steering of it. Guidance, therefore, refers to what we more commonly call advice. It’s people either informing or actually directing the choice we make. They enlighten us or may even lead us in our choosing. That’s advice.

And notice what the wise man writes about it in 20:18. Prepare plans by consultation. Make war by wise guidance. He endorses advice here. He urges us to seek it in times of decision.

Don’t misunderstand what he means by that. I’ve preached before that God created us with the capacity and freedom make decisions. To seek advice doesn’t mean to surrender that freedom to others. We should never let anyone dictate our decisions. The choices we make should come from our will and not the will of others.

But having said that, I’d also say this. We should seek the advice of others. After all, we aren’t omniscient. We don’t know everything. Sometimes, others know what we don’t. So, we seek their advice in case they do. We ask them to inform our choice – to tell us anything they know that might enlighten it. Or we may even ask them to direct our choice – to tell us what they would do if they were us.

Years ago, a person I was counseling told me something that bordered on mandatory reporting. So I called a policeman, Gary Wiery, gave him the facts, and asked whether or not he thought I should report

it. I then decided – based on my thinking and his – that I should.

Our verses teach that we should seek the advice of others and experience confirms it. So let's seek it. Two issues arise when we do, both of which our verses address.

Issue #1 - to Whom We Should Go for Advice

One is, **"To whom should we go for advice?"** 20:18 and 24:6 use the term **"wise guidance"** as opposed to **"foolish guidance."**

We can go to foolish people for advice. I mean those who are incompetent to advise as it relates to the circumstance and choices before us. They may be competent in other circumstances but aren't in the one before us. Seeking and heeding their advice, therefore, can be detrimental and sometimes even ruinous.

It seems a struggling business owner went to a Christian he knew for advice. He told him how bad business was and asked him what he should do. The Christian told him to go home, get out a Bible, randomly open it, and then do what the first words he saw on the page said or implied he should. Later, the businessman ran into the Christian who asked him what he did. **"I filed for Chapter 11 Bankruptcy,"** he answered. **"Why did you do that?"** the Christian asked. **"I did what you told me,"** the businessman replied, **"And the first words I saw were 'Chapter 11.'"** That Christian was incompetent to advise him because he believed something that isn't so. It's that Bible roulette, which is what he advised, is a valid method of divine guidance.

The businessman received bad advice because he sought it from the wrong person, a fool. That's a common mistake I've witnessed people make over and over again, especially in the marital context. Husbands and wives with troubled marriages, desperate for consolation and advice, seek it from their friends. They seem to think that just because they're friends who care about them, the advice they give is reliable. But that frequently isn't the case. I've seen it over and over again. Friends give them bad advice that they follow just because they're friends.

They and we though shouldn't. We should seek advice not from the foolish but from the wise. The wise are those who are competent to advise as it relates to the circumstance and choices before us. 11:14, 15:22, and 24:6 describe the result of following their advice in terms of **"victory"** and **"success."** It's beneficial and life-enhancing.

That then is to whom we should go for advice. It's the wise not the foolish.

How to Choose to Whom to God

But how do we know who is wise and who is foolish – who is competent and who is incompetent to advise us? Competence and incompetence to advise have to do with four fundamental factors.

One is knowledge. Knowledge refers to comprehending what is real or true. It refers to being informed. Fools are uninformed or misinformed in relation to the circumstance. The wise are informed.

A second factor is beliefs. Beliefs refer to assumptions about what is real or true. The beliefs of fools aren't based on knowledge, and thus much of what they assume is real or true isn't. The beliefs of the wise are based on knowledge, and thus what they assume is real or true is.

A third factor is values. Values refer to judgments about the importance of things. Fools judge things to be more or less important than they objectively are. The wise judge things to be as important or unimportant as they objectively are.

Finally, a fourth factor is logic. Logic refers to applying the relations of implication and contradiction to knowledge, beliefs, and values and drawing valid conclusions from them. Fools apply them incorrectly and draw invalid conclusions as a result. The wise apply them correctly and draw valid conclusions.

So those are the four fundamental factors of competence and incompetence and we must grasp this. Every person who advises us does so on the basis of them. What the person knows, believes, and values and how he or she applies logic to all of that direct and determine the

advice he or she gives us.

We should, therefore, do two things. First, determine as best as we can people's knowledge, beliefs, values, and use of logic – before seeking their advice. Second, don't seek their advice if those four factors make them incompetent. Do seek it if they make them competent.

It may be that we can't determine their knowledge, beliefs, values, and use of logic before seeking their advice. But we can as they're giving it by analyzing it and asking questions. If we conclude they aren't competent, we question their advice. If we conclude they are, we seriously consider it in the choice we make.

I counseled a Christian who had decided to divorce her adulterous but repentant husband. She decided it on the advice of three friends who focused on her inability now to trust him. I asked if her friends knew and believed what the Bible says about marriage and divorce, to which she replied they didn't. I then pointed out to her that made them incompetent to advise her. I also explained why. They didn't know and believe the most vital information that related to the circumstance and choices before her.

You get the point. Don't seek but do question the advice of the foolish, those who are incompetent to give it. Do seek and seriously consider the advice of the wise, those who are competent to give it.

Issue #2 – to How Many Should We Go for Advice

Seeking advice raises a second issue. The first is **"To whom should we go for it?"** The second is **"To how many should we go for it?"**

In 11:14, the wise man mentions **"where there is no guidance"** and in 15:22 being **"without consultation."** Commentator Derek Kidner interprets their meaning, **"It's fatally easy to shut out disquieting opinions."** It is easy, and thus common. We shut out the advice of wise people who we think might tell us what we don't want to hear.

A young attorney, who needed the money, was considering whether or not to take a rather flimsy slip and fall case. So he sought the advice

of two experienced attorneys, both plaintiffs' attorneys. He shut out the advice of defendants' attorneys who might tell him what he didn't want to hear – that it was a frivolous case and he shouldn't take it.

People routinely do what he did. They shut out disquieting advice, and the wise man reveals what the consequence can be when they do. It's "**falling**" in 11:14 and plans being "**frustrated**" in 15:22. It can be detrimental in other words and as Kidner points out, sometimes even fatal. The young attorney, for instance, took the case and after hours of hard work had to settle it for a pittance.

In contrast to that approach, the wise man urges us in 11:14, 15:22, and 24:6 to have an "**abundance of**" or "**many**" counselors. Certainly, we can seek the advice of too many people, which leaves us frustrated, confused, and/or delayed. King Zedekiah in Jeremiah 38 was a classic case in point. But at the same time, the wise man emphasizes the value of seeking enough advice. One author wisely suggests this in that regard: "**Take counsel from at least two people whose relationship with God you respect, preferably those who are not your buddies. This may be done in a group setting if it does not concern an inherently private matter.**" I believe his advice about advice is good advice. Seek the counsel of at least two Jesus-followers who have the courage and love to tell us what they know and truly think.

Conclusion

I leave you in closing with a list of names: Abigail Van Buren, Anne Landers, E. Jean Carrol, Carolyn Hax, and Amy Dickinson to name just a few. What do all of those individuals have in common? It's that they're advice columnists. Their very profession suggests just how desperate the need for good advice is. According to the verses we read in fact, living well depends on it. We should all seek it, therefore, from wise people in the times of decision. Or to say it differently, we should all have, metaphorically speaking, our own personal "**Dear Abby's.**"