

Introduction

In March of 1990, the Chairman of the Republican National Committee, Lee Atwater, was diagnosed with a malignant brain tumor. He lived a year, during which he fought the battle to survive. A month before he died, an article he wrote about that battle appeared in the February 1991 issue of *Life Magazine*. Listen to a line from it: **"If this (my illness) is a test, then I'm not sure if you pass it by displaying the determination to live or the courage to die."** Atwater, like every fatally ill person does at some point, had a decision to make. Would he have the determination to live or the courage to die?

All of us too have vital decisions to make and there's a guideline for making them – WWJD, **What Would Jesus Decide** – and that's what I'm going to preach about today. Turn to Ecclesiastes 10:1-3.

The Decisions We Make

Let's start with verse 2 and the Hebrew word translated **"heart."** That word has several connotations in the Old Testament. In this verse it connotes the **"mind."** Notice what the mind does. It **"directs"** us as my NASB translates it. There are two or more options before us and our mind directs us to one of those. We call that deciding.

Think of it in terms of a normal day. You decided to come to church this morning. Those who aren't here decided not to come. This afternoon, some of you will decide to take a nap. Others of you will decide to take a run. How many vote for the nap? Anyway, each normal day is a series of countless decisions we make.

We can also think of it in terms of a lifetime. Turn and look at the spouse sitting next to you if you have one. He or she is the result of a decision you made years ago and a defining one at that. Or think about the job to which you will go tomorrow morning. That job is the result of a decision you made, perhaps years ago, and a defining one at that. Our is simply a series of countless decisions we make.

What the Decisions We Make Are About

Now, Solomon tells us what the decisions we make, both big and small, are all about in verse 2. Notice to what our mind directs us. It's to either the right or the left.

The two sides here, right and left, are symbolic. Two passages help us understand what they symbolize. One is Genesis 48:8-22. In Hebrew culture, a father gave his elder son the greater blessing and his younger son the lesser. He expressed that by placing his right hand on the elder and his left on the younger when he officially blessed them. The other passage is Matthew 25:31-46. Jesus used the two sides to represent two contrasting verdicts. At judgment, the sheep, which get rewarded, are on the right side. The goats, which get punished, are on the left. Those passages reveal what the right and left symbolize in verse 2.

Most decisively, the right represents what is morally right and the left what is morally wrong. Someone slanders you. Will you resent or forgive? Your boyfriend asks that you have sex with him. Will you fornicate or stay chaste? Your day goes badly. Will you grumble or give thanks? In those decisions, you're choosing between right and wrong.

Less decisively, the right represents what is more beneficial and the left what is less beneficial. Will you have chemotherapy treatments or not have them? Will you buy a used car or a new one? Will you marry the person you're dating or not marry? Will you go to college or a technical school or neither? In those decisions, you aren't choosing between right and wrong but between more and less beneficial.

Those then are the two sides to which our mind can direct us and notice how Solomon assesses each one. The right is the side of the wise and the left of the foolish. I quoted verse 2 to a politically liberal friend of mine to prove that the political right is wise and the left foolish but I was just teasing them. That isn't what it teaches. What it does teach is this. Choice is where wisdom and foolishness dwell. That's a critical insight. It's wise to choose the morally right and more beneficial. It's foolish to choose the morally wrong and less beneficial.

What the Decisions We Make Do

Solomon explains why it is in verse 1. The first line in the verse is a little parable. A perfumer works long and hard to create a sweet smelling oil. But then a couple of flies land in it and die. The dead flies in turn ferment the oil, which ends up making it stink. The second line in the verse explains what the parable means. The perfumer making the oil represents making wise decisions. The flies falling into the oil represents making foolish decisions. The oil stinking represents foolish decisions ruining what wise decisions create.

When something bad happens, we sometimes say, "**This stinks.**" That's Solomon's very point in verse 1. Foolish decisions cause a stink. When things go wrong in our lives, they're usually the reason they do. Robert Schuller says it this way: "**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.**" Do you get what he's saying. If we trace our problems back far enough, the source of 90% of them is a decision or decisions we made or failed to make. The 90% figure may seem high to you but, in reality, it's probably close.

Years ago, I talked with a young couple who were filing bankruptcy. Their faith shaken, they asked, "**Why did God do this to us?**" But as I tried to get them to see, He didn't do it to them. They did it to themselves. Each had a well-paying job that could support a normal lifestyle. But they weren't living a normal lifestyle. They went into debt for a huge home, fancy furnishings, new cars, extravagant vacations, and so on. Their two jobs could afford that. But when the wife lost hers and couldn't get another comparable one, it all came crashing down around them. It wasn't the job loss that bankrupted them. It was their decision to live lavishly instead.

It's true. Most of the bad things that happen to us are the result of foolish decisions we make.

But the opposite is also true. Most of the good things that happen to us are the result of wise decisions we make. Things are going well for

me in my marriage for instance because I chose to do two things: (1) marry the wonderful person I did; and (2) go to craft shows without complaining. 90% of the good things we experience, get, or do are the result of wise decisions we make.

That then is what verses 1 and 2 teach us. Choice is where both wisdom and foolishness dwell. Whether things will go poorly or well for us depends on the decisions we make. That's makes our calling clear. Turn to the right not the left. Make wise, not foolish decisions.

What the Basis of Decisions Should not Be

Now, the opening line in verse 2 generally and the word "heart" specifically teach us how to do that. They imply what the basis of our decisions should and should not be.

First, it should not be feeling. Remember what the word "**heart**" connotes in this verse, the mind. It refers to thinking as opposed to feeling. This verse doesn't recognize feeling directing us because it shouldn't. What we feel should never dictate what we decide.

When I was in seminary, a man in the little country church I pastored died of a heart attack. A month or so later his grieving widow told me that she had decided to sell their home. The home and yard were constant reminders of him, she said, and she couldn't bear it. A year or so later, however, she told me that selling their home was the worst decision she ever made. She wasn't fractured like she was before and now longed for, not despised those memories her home gave her.

I learned a lesson from that. Decisions, if they're to be wise ones, must be rooted in reality. But feelings, both positive and negative, are not. They're often pictures or reflections of things as they are not. That's why we should never allow them to dictate what we decide.

In his book *Living Positively One Day at a Time*, Robert Schuller identifies four negative feelings upon which people commonly base their decisions: fear, frustration, fracture, and frenzy. The widow I mentioned, for instance, decided to sell her home because she was

fractured (grieved and depressed). We should never make critical life decisions, if we can help it, when we're in an emotional valley like that one – or even when we're on an emotional mountaintop. We should wait until we're on solid psychological ground again before we do. That widow would have not have sold her home if she had waited and done that.

The bottom line is this. Our feelings, positive or negative, shouldn't direct us. What we feel should never dictate what we decide.

What the Basis of Decisions Should Be

What should, according to the word “**heart**”, is what we think. It's our mind that should direct us. It does so by taking into account and interconnecting three things.

Years ago, I counseled a couple in their mid-30's who were engaged to be married. I discovered in the course of doing so that the man had an anger problem. Based on the woman's comments, in fact, I advised her not to marry him. But she did anyway. Shortly after she divorced him four years later, she explained to me why she had married him in the first place. She thought he would change and her biological clock was ticking. She decided to marry him, in other words, because of what she valued, having children, and believed, he's going to change.

That illustrates how we make decisions. We take into account and interconnect three things: values, beliefs, and information. Values refer to the things we consider important. Beliefs refer to the things we assume are so. And information refers to the things we know are so. We always decide based on what we value, believe, and know.

Let's go back to the Atwater's statement. My experience has been that almost all Christians choose the determination to live over the courage to die to the bitter end. They do so, in my view, for two reasons. First, they, like almost everyone, value staying alive on earth more than anything. Second, they lack information about life after death. It's true. The decisions we make are always based on what we value, believe, and know.

You recognize the implication of course. The correctness of our values, beliefs, and information determines the wisdom of our decisions. That explains that woman's bad decision to marry the angry man. A key belief upon which it was based, he'll change when we're married, was false. If we value, believe, and know correctly, we can decide wisely. That's why I suggest this. Once you've made a decision, but before you carry it out, identify the values, beliefs, and information upon which it's based. Then assess their correctness or incorrectness as best you can.

Now, there's something we must do to in order to value, believe, and know correctly. We must cultivate what Paul called "**the mind of Christ.**" We cultivate that by doing three things. First, learn all we can about Jesus, His character, from Scripture. Second, learn all we can about what He says in Scripture. And third, regularly direct our mind to what we learn. Constantly think about and place our mind on who He is and what He says. The Holy Spirit increasingly gives us His mind when we do. We come to increasingly value, believe, and know as He does. We're then able to decide as He would decide.

Tony Campolo tells about a good high school football player who decided not to play his senior year because it interfered with an evangelistic outreach program he wanted to join. His family, friends, and even his youth leader at church were upset about it but he stuck to his guns. Campolo explains why he decided what he did. First, he believed there's more fulfillment and joy in serving others than in playing sports. And second, he valued God's approval more than man's. He had the mind of Jesus, in other words. He valued, believed, and knew as He does and thus decided as He would decide.

Conclusion

And so should we. All of you know the celebrated acronym "**WWJD.**" It stands for "**What would Jesus do?**" But think of it in these terms instead, "**What would Jesus decide?**" Let's have His mind. We'll make His decisions if we do.