

“You Must Choose, But Choose Wisely”

How do you make decisions? How did you decide what to wear today? How do you choose a husband/wife? How do you choose a career? A college? How do parents make decisions about their sick children in the hospital? How does a jury decide between life and death? There are many factors that go into each of the decisions that we make every day.

I am really not very good at making decisions. I like to have closure and know what is going to happen with things, so sometimes I make decisions too quickly. For instance, in planning our wedding, I have been tempted several times to go ahead and book a photographer, or a DJ, when I haven't even seen all of the options out there. I have had to leave a certain part of my psyche in turmoil while we wait to make the final decisions on some of those things. I just have to be satisfied with the fact that we've booked the church and have talked to and "reserved" all of the participants that we want to involve in the ceremony.

Then there's another part of me that just wants someone else to make the decision for me because I just can't decide. Have you seen the Disney movie *The Jungle Book*? There are these two blackbirds that have small parts in the movie and every one of their conversations go something like this: (they have British accents, but I'll spare you that) "So, what you want to do today?" "I dunno, what you want to do?" "I dunno what you want to do?"...until one of them finally gets fed up and yells, "Now, cut that out!" This is what some of our conversations sound like when Matt and I are trying to figure out what restaurant to go to. I want him to decide for me.

And then don't even get me started on how I decided to leave my job and former life to go to seminary. It took me over two and a half years before I finally listened to God's call for a new life. Let's just say I was not exactly like the disciples when Jesus first called them to leave their lives to follow him. I really wanted someone else to make THAT decision for me, but no one would do it.

Some decisions are just easier to make than others. We all know that. And we all know that some decisions are better than others. So, HOW do we make the decisions in our lives? How do YOU make decisions in your life? I am not talking about WHAT choices to make, but HOW do you make them? There are many people who like to tell you that you must choose wisely but they don't offer much advice on HOW to make the decision. There are many ways of making decisions: you can flip a coin, write out a pros/cons list, or let someone else decide for you, or you can always wait for the beam of white light from heaven to show you the way.

Now I used to be a college career counselor in my former life and I spent my days helping students make choices about what to major in and what careers to choose. Which was actually kind of ironic because I was having a hard time trying to decide what I wanted to do and here I was trying to help others decide what to do. Some of them would get really angry with me, and other counselors, because we wouldn't choose something for them. I used to keep a basket on my desk with little slips of paper in it. Each slip of paper had the name of a career on it. Every once in a while, with a group of students that I was presenting to, I would take the basket and have them pick careers out of it to illustrate the point that having me pick a career for them is just as useless as them picking one out of a basket because I didn't know what kinds of

things were important to them when looking for a job and I didn't know what they liked and disliked nor did I know what they might be good at. We were not in the decision-making business. We were in the business of helping THEM to make the decisions based on information that we could help them uncover about themselves. How did they make their decisions? I think they all had different ways of doing it, but I know that one of the ways that some of them decided was to go with what their parents wanted them to do, but again, they all had different ways of choosing.

How did the disciples choose their newest member? The writer of Acts says that they cast lots. (Maybe I should have told some of the students I used to work with to try that one!) But, how did the disciples decide on the two who would be up for the job? They had certain criteria that the new disciple must meet...a job description of sorts that they would be locked into. The new disciple would have to already be a member of the club in a way, in verses 21-22, it says he must be one who has "accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us – one of these must become a witness with us to his resurrection." So, this new disciple couldn't be just anyone...oh no. They had to be someone who had already passed some of the tests. They had to have already put in some long hours on the job without the recognition that the other disciples had gotten.

It sounds to me as if they were going to hire an intern from within the ranks. One of the interns who had done all the work with no pay and no acknowledgement from the boss; one of the underlings who had cleaned up after everyone and gotten the coffee and made the others look good by setting up Jesus' speaking engagements and making

sure security was tight at those locations. They wanted someone who had been there from the beginning...someone who knew the ropes. They didn't want to have to train anyone new.

The disciples knew that they needed another member because as it says in verse 18, "the scripture had to be fulfilled." Judas had to do what he did. Based on the job description, they come up with two candidates – Barsabbas/Joseph/Justus and Matthias – neither of which are mentioned anywhere else in the Bible, but that's beside the point. The disciples had to make a choice, but didn't seem to want to make the choice themselves. Casting lots sounds along the lines of drawing straws or flipping a coin – a way of putting off the decision onto something besides themselves. Before they cast their lots though, they prayed. Here again we hear something that sounds like they don't want to have to, or can't, make the decision on their own, so they ask for God's intervention. In verse 24, when they prayed they asked God to, "Show us which one of these two you have chosen." This passage makes it clear that God is the one who is in charge and they know it. God is the one who will make sure that the right person is chosen to be the twelfth disciple. Despite the actions of the fallible, human disciples, God is still in charge. So, they really don't have to make the decision – God will do it for them, right?

So, they cast lots. This was supposed to show them what God's decision was. Is that how we are supposed to interpret God's decisions for us -- by casting lots...or by flipping a coin...or drawing straws? We want God to make it clear to us what we are supposed to do (well, at least I do anyway), but it's not that easy, we still have to go

through our own means to make our decisions....that whole, bothersome human-free-will thing.

How does God help us make choices? – Do we think about God's action in our decision-making? We have to rely on our faith that God will lead us in the right direction and help us make good decisions. But, what about when we make a bad decision? Haven't we all made at least one bad decision in our lives? Does God cause us to make bad decisions? No, we do that on our own (again, that free-will thing). So is God's action to teach us lessons that we learn from those bad choices? Maybe. If we steer ourselves wrong through our own action, we have to have faith that God will lead us back onto the right path, but we have to be willing to choose the right path. I am not here to say what that "right path" is because it is different for everyone. The Psalmist says in Psalm 1 that was read earlier, "Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked...for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous." It is up to us to discern what the "wicked" is versus the "righteous." Some choices are easy, some are difficult. When we struggle with the tough decisions, this is when our faith is hard to summon up. It is much easier to just question God and get angry with God. "Why did you make this life so hard God?" It's like the Tootsie Pop commercial used to say, "The world may never know." That's the frustrating thing about God...sometimes we just don't know. We just have to have faith.

How did Jesus choose his original disciples? They were ordinary people, not "holy" priests etc. But that was God's plan. Maybe having "ordinary" people following him around would make Jesus more credible with the crowds ("If these 'regular Joe's' believe what Jesus is all about, maybe we should too."). Or maybe Jesus just wanted to

make the point that no one is exempt from God's love. Even though one of them, Judas, turned out to be not-so-good – he made a bad choice. Actually Peter made a bad choice too, he denied that he even knew Jesus, so how did he become a leader among the disciples while Judas ended up dead? They were all fallible human beings, quite capable of making mistakes and yet Jesus loved them anyway and called them to come follow him. All of the disciples had to make some pretty big decisions – give up their lives that they had known, give up their jobs, leave everything behind, and follow Jesus. How in the world did they make that decision? Would you be able to make that kind of decision?

We all have big decisions to make in our lives all the time so how do we do it? Do we do as 1 John says and trust in the work of God in our lives? I like to have concrete evidence when making my decisions. I like to know, or at least be fairly certain, that things are going to work out the way I want them to. When it comes to being guided by God though, we don't always have those concrete pieces of evidence. That's where faith comes in. I didn't have any solid pieces of evidence saying to me that seminary is the absolute right choice. I had to make a leap of faith. So, here I am...leaping...without a net...and always praying that I have made the right decision. Hoping that I have not "follow[ed] the advice of the wicked" and that I have chosen the "way of the righteous" as the Psalmist says.

God will hopefully lead us to make good choices, but even if we don't, God will still love us. That doesn't mean that we should just go out, randomly making bad choices just for the fun of it, but God's grace abounds when we do mess up. I have found this out many times in my life – as shocking as that is to hear – yes, even I have

made some bad choices. I made a bad choice recently that I didn't even know was a bad choice until after I found out that I had been scammed out of a LOT of money. It's a long and embarrassing story, so I won't repeat it all here, but even though I made that bad choice, I know that God still loves me and was trying to teach me some kind of lesson, although I'm still trying to figure out what that lesson is.

We all have choices to make in our lives. Do we make the choice to live the life of a disciple, following Jesus' example and teachings? Do we make the tough choice to stop and help the homeless person on the side of the road? Do we choose to fight the injustices that are happening in the world everyday? Whether we cast lots like the disciples did or flip a coin or make a pros and cons list, we need to make sure we always pray that God will show us the right choice to make. The disciples had to make a tough choice in which person would be the new disciple. They trusted that God would show them.

Making the choice to follow Christ can be evident in simple things like praying for others or helping out at a soup kitchen or one of the downtown night shelters. Making the choice to follow Christ can also mean leaving the life as you know it now behind to do full time work in the Sudan or right here in Atlanta. There are many ways to follow Christ.

Has anyone ever told you that "It's your call?" – meaning "it's your decision." "You make the call." What if when we heard "It's your call" we thought about it as "It's our call from God to do what God means for us to do in our lives?" My suggestion is to NOT be like those blackbirds from *The Jungle Book*, constantly putting off your decisions onto someone else. Rather, I think that, no matter HOW we make our

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decisions, we should trust in God, say a prayer, and take that leap of faith. One choice that we do not make is in whether or not to choose God. The disciples didn't choose God, God chose them. We don't choose God, God chooses us. Our choice is in how we decide how to respond. How will you respond? The choice is yours.

AMEN.