

PASTOR'S NOTES. How do we decide?

When we have to make a major life decision, we are told we should seek God's will for us. But how do we do that? We are usually told to pray about it, and while that might allow us an opportunity to lay out all of the important issues around our decision, we might wonder if we are really open to hearing a voice other than the one that already tells us to do what we *want* to do.

As Christians, a key factor in any major decision is to consider how our own wants and desires play a part. If your experience is like mine, when making a key decision, people would ask me questions like "what do you really want" or "what does your heart tell you?" But there is good reason to treat these ideas with suspicion. Remember these words in two places in the Book of Proverbs:

*"There is a way that seems right to a person, but its end is the way to death."*

(Proverbs 14:12, see also Proverbs 16:25, NRSV)

Our natural desires and wants are all under the power of sin:

*"What then? Are we Jews any better off? No, not at all. For we have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin."*

(Romans 3:9, ESV)

So it should not be a surprise when Jesus says:

*"Then [Jesus] said to them all, 'If any want to become My followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow Me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for My sake will save it.'"*

(Luke 9:23-24, NRSV)

Jesus Himself carries this all the way to the Garden and to the cross:

*And going a little farther, [Jesus] threw Himself on the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not what I want but what You want."*

(Matthew 26:39, NRSV)

So it follows that a key element in our *daily* decision-making should be, "not my will but His will be done."

But does this mean that every decision needs to be a denial of ourselves? Sometimes we have two choices and both benefit us and/or our families, and the best for them seems to also be the best for us. On the other hand, sometimes all the choices seem to hurt us. And certainly some would argue that, for instance, changing to a higher-paying job might afford us more time or resources to be able to serve others. It is often far from clear.

The words we use in the Covenant worship service at the beginning of the New Year say it this way:

*"Christ has many services to be done; some are easy, others are difficult; some bring honor, others bring reproach; some are suitable to our natural inclinations, and temporal interests, others are contrary to both. In some we may please Christ and please ourselves; in others we cannot please Christ except by denying ourselves. Yet the power to do all these things is assuredly given us in Christ, Who strengthens us."*

*(from the Wesleyan Covenant Service, 1755)*

With these questions in mind, let us consider a classic example from the scriptures:

*While we were staying there for several days, a prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. He came to us and took Paul's belt, bound his own feet and hands with it, and said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'This is the way the Jews in Jerusalem will bind the man who owns this belt and will hand him over to the Gentiles.'"* When we heard this, we and the people there urged [Paul] not to go up to Jerusalem.

*Then Paul answered, "What are you doing, weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound but even to die in Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." Since he would not be persuaded, we remained silent except to say, "The Lord's will be done."*

(Acts 21:10-14, NRSV)

So Paul is warned by a prophet that if he goes to Jerusalem he will be arrested. The Christian people around him, including the author (Luke), take this as a sign that he should NOT go to Jerusalem. But Paul takes it as a warning of what to expect when he goes to Jerusalem, which he feels is what God wants him to do. Was Paul right? In hindsight, it looks like his action contributed to the growth of the church and without going the spread of the Christian faith might not have happened the way it did. However, his companions, even to this day, might say Paul was simply being stubborn and had already made up his mind. And if Paul had not gone to Jerusalem, God might have still blessed the work that he and other early Christian witnesses were doing. Personally, I am convinced that whichever way Paul had decided, God would make a way.

What convinces me? The promise is that God is with us (Matthew 1:23; John 14:17; 15:4, 7, 9; Matthew 28:20, among many other verses). As long as we are sincerely seeking God's will, we will inevitably make mistakes, but God is still there to walk along with us. And if we are daily about "seeking God's kingdom and His righteousness" (Matthew 6:23), then we are "setting our minds" on the important things:

*"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."*

(Matthew 6:19-21, NRSV)

*"So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God."* (Colossians 3:1-3, NRSV)

So my prayer for each of us is that we can be open to God's will, even if it takes us to uncomfortable places, or seems to against our own interests completely. Are we truly obedient when we follow a rule we agree with? Maybe. But the real test is will we obey when we don't agree... Then we have to ask ourselves, who really is my Lord?

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to be 'Kam' or similar, written in a cursive style.