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#### **Forward**

## God gives choices to us

#### Genesis 2:15-17

The Lord God placed the man in the Garden of Eden to tend and care for it. But the Lord God gave him this warning: "You may freely eat any fruit in the garden except fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If you eat of its fruit, you will surely die."

Why would God place a tree in the garden and then forbid Adam to eat from it? God wanted Adam to obey, but God gave Adam the freedom to choose.

Without choice, Adam would have been like a prisoner, and his obedience would have been hollow. The two trees provided an exercise in choice, with rewards for choosing to obey and sad consequences for choosing to disobey. When you are faced with the choice, always choose to obey God.

Godliness helps people all through life, while the evil is destroyed by their wickedness.

Living right is like posting a guard for your life. Every choice for good sets into motion other opportunities for doing good.

Evil choices follow the same pattern, but in the opposite direction. Each decision you make to obey God's Word will bring a greater sense of order to your life, while each decision to disobey will bring confusion and destruction.

The right choices you make reflect your integrity. Obedience brings the greatest safety and security.



What seems wise versus what is wise

#### **Genesis 13:12**

So while Abram stayed in the land of Canaan, Lot moved his tents to a place near Sodom, among the cities of the plain.

Adam and Eve failed to heed God's warning recorded in Genesis 2:16-17. They did not understand the reasons for his command, so they chose to act in another way that looked better to them.

All of God's commands are for our own good, but we may not always understand the reasons behind them. People who trust God will obey because God asks them to, whether or not they understand why God commands it.

When God asked Adam about his sin, Adam blamed Eve. Then Eve blamed the serpent. How easy it is to excuse our sins by blaming someone else or circumstances.

But God knows the truth, and he holds each of us responsible for what we do (see Genesis 3:14-19). Admit your wrong attitudes and actions and apologize to God. Don't try to get away with sin by blaming someone else.

## Abraham made a good choice

## Why God chose Israel as a special nation.

#### **Exodus 19:5**

Now if you will obey me and keep my covenant, you will be my own special treasure from among all the nations of the earth; for all the earth belongs to me.

God had a reason for rescuing the Israelites from slavery. Now he was ready to tell them what it was: Israel was to become a kingdom of priests and a holy nation where anyone could approach God freely.

It didn't take long, however, for the people to corrupt God's plan. God then established Aaron's descendants from the tribe of Levi as priests, representing what the entire nation should have been (Leviticus 8-9).

But with the coming of Jesus Christ, God has once again extended his plan to all believers. We are to become holy, a "royal priesthood" (1 Peter 2:9). The death and resurrection of Christ has allowed each of us to approach God freely.

Why did God choose Israel as his nation? God knew that no nation on earth was good enough to deserve to be called his people, his "treasured possession." He chose Israel, not because of anything they had done, but in his love and mercy he chose Israel in spite of the wrong the nation had done and would do.

Why did he want to have a special nation on earth?

It was to represent his way of life, to teach his Word, and to be an agent of salvation to the world.

"All nations on earth" would be blessed through Abraham's descendants (Genesis 18:18). Gentiles and kings would come to the Lord through Israel, predicted Isaiah (Isaiah 60:3). Through the nation of Israel, the Messiah, God's chosen Son, would be born. God chose one nation and put it through a rigorous training program, so that one day it could be a channel for his blessings to the whole world.

In Genesis 15 and Genesis 17, God made a covenant with Abraham, promising to make his descendants into a great nation. Now that promise was being realized as God restated his agreement with the Israelite nation, the descendants of Abraham. God promised to bless and care for them. The people promised to obey him.

The covenant was thus sealed. But the good intentions of the people quickly wore off.

Have you made a commitment to God? How are you holding up your end of the bargain?



Disobedience is a foolish choice.

#### Deut. 11:26

"Today I am giving you the choice between a blessing and a curse!

What is God's curse? It is not a magician's spell. To understand it, we must remember the conditions of the covenant between God and Israel.

Both parties had agreed to the terms. The blessings would benefit Israel if they kept their part of the covenant: They would receive the land, live there forever, have fruitful crops, and expel their enemies.

The curse would fall on Israel only if they broke their agreement; then they would forfeit God's blessing and would be in danger of crop failure, invasion, and expulsion from their land.

Joshua later reviewed these blessings and curses with the entire nation (Joshua 8:34).

blessings and curses. It is even more amazing that most of them, through their disobedience, chose the curses. We have the same fundamental choice today. We can live for ourselves or live in service to God. To choose our own way is to travel on a deadend road, but to choose God's way is to receive eternal life (John 5:24).

## May need to seek more options

#### 2 Samuel 11:15

The letter instructed Joab, "Station Uriah on the front lines where the battle is fiercest. Then pull back so that he will be killed."

David put both Bathsheba and Joab in difficult situations. Bathsheba knew it was wrong to commit adultery, but to refuse a king's request could mean punishment or death. Joab did not know why Uriah had to die, but it was obvious the king wanted him killed.

We sometimes face situations with only two apparent choices, and both seem wrong. When that happens, we must not lose sight of what God wants. The answer may be to seek out more choices. By doing this, we are likely to find a choice that honors God.

## The day-to-day choices we make are important.

## **Proverbs 1:10-19**

My children, if sinners entice you, turn your back on them! They may say, "Come and join us. Let's hide and kill someone! Let's ambush the innocent! Let's swallow them alive as the grave swallows its victims. Though they are in the prime of life, they will go down into the pit of death. And the loot we'll get! We'll fill our houses with all kinds of things! Come on, throw in your lot with us; we'll split our loot with you."

Don't go along with them, my child! Stay far away from their paths. They rush to commit crimes. They hurry to commit murder.

When a bird sees a trap being set, it stays away. But not these people! They set an ambush for themselves; they booby-trap their own lives! Such is the fate of all who are greedy for gain. It ends up robbing them of life.

Sin is enticing because it offers a quick route to prosperity and makes us feel like one of the crowd. But when we go along with others and refuse to listen to the truth, our own appetites become our masters, and we'll do anything to satisfy them. Sin, even when attractive, is deadly.

We must learn to make choices, not on the basis of flashy appeal or short-range pleasure, but in view of the long-range effects. Sometimes this means steering clear of people who want to entice us into activities that we know are wrong. We can't be friendly with sin and expect our lives to remain unaffected.

Going after "ill-gotten gain" is one of Satan's surest traps. It begins when he plants the suggestion that we can't live without some possession or more money. Then that desire fans its own fire until it becomes an all-consuming obsession. Ask God for wisdom to recognize any greedy desire before it destroys you. God will help you overcome it.



## **Benefits of good choices**

## **Proverbs 13:6**

Godliness helps people all through life, while the evil are destroyed by their wickedness.

Living right is like posting a guard for your life. Every choice for good sets into motion other opportunities for good.

Evil choices follow the same pattern, but in the opposite direction. Each decision you make to obey God's Word will bring a greater sense of order to your life, while each decision to disobey will bring confusion and destruction.

The right choices you make reflect your integrity. Obedience brings the greatest safety and security.

## Questions to help us choose rightly

## John 5:19-23

Jesus replied, "I assure you, the Son can do nothing by himself. He does only what he sees the Father doing. Whatever the Father does, the Son also does.

For the Father loves the Son and tells him everything he is doing, and the Son will do far greater things than healing this man.

You will be astonished at what he does. He will even raise from the dead anyone he wants to, just as the Father does.

And the Father leaves all judgment to his Son, so that everyone will honor the Son, just as they honor the Father. But if you refuse to honor the Son, then you are certainly not honoring the Father who sent him.

Because of his unity with God, Jesus lived as God wanted him to live. Because of our identification with Jesus, we must honor him and live as he wants us to live. The questions "What would Jesus do?" and "What would Jesus have me do?" may help us make the right choices.

## Following Christ means making difficult choices.

### Matthew 9:9

As Jesus was going down the road, he saw Matthew sitting at his tax-collection booth. "Come, be my disciple," Jesus said to him. So Matthew got up and followed him.

Matthew was a Jew who was appointed by the Romans to be the area's tax collector. He collected taxes from the citizens as well as from merchants passing through town. Tax collectors were expected to take a commission on the taxes they collected, but most of them overcharged and kept the profits. Thus, tax collectors were hated by the Jews because of their reputation for cheating and because of their support of Rome.

When Jesus called Matthew to be one of his disciples, Matthew got up and followed, leaving a lucrative career. When God calls you to follow

or obey him, do you do it with as much abandon as Matthew? Sometimes the decision to follow Christ requires difficult or painful choices. Like Matthew, we must decide to leave behind those things that would keep us from following Christ.

## In making choices

#### **Matthew 16:26**

And how do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your own soul in the process? Is anything worth more than your soul?

When we don't know Christ, we make choices as though this life were all we have. In reality, this life is just the introduction to eternity. How we live this brief span, however, determines our eternal state.

What we accumulate on earth has no value in purchasing eternal life. Even the highest social or civic honors cannot earn us entrance into heaven. Evaluate all that happens from an eternal perspective, and you will find your values and decisions changing.



God allows us to make choices

#### **Romans 1:24-32**

So God let them go ahead and do whatever shameful things their hearts desired. As a result, they did vile and degrading things with each other's bodies. Instead of believing what they knew was the truth about God, they deliberately chose to believe lies. So they worshiped the things God made but not the Creator himself, who is to be praised forever. Amen.

That is why God abandoned them to their shameful desires. Even the women turned against the natural way to have sex and instead indulged in sex with each other.

And the men, instead of having normal sexual relationships with women, burned with lust for each other. Men did shameful things with other men and, as a result, suffered within themselves the penalty they so richly deserved.

When they refused to acknowledge God, he abandoned them to their evil minds and let them do things that should never be done. Their lives

became full of every kind of wickedness, sin, greed, hate, envy, murder, fighting, deception, malicious behavior, and gossip.

They are backstabbers, haters of God, insolent, proud, and boastful. They are forever inventing new ways of sinning and are disobedient to their parents. They refuse to understand, break their promises, and are heartless and unforgiving. They are fully aware of God's death penalty for those who do these things, yet they go right ahead and do them anyway. And, worse yet, they encourage others to do them, too.

These people chose to reject God, and God allowed them to do it. God does not usually stop us from making choices that are against his will. He lets us declare our supposed independence from him, even though he knows that in time we will become slaves to our own rebellious choices—we will lose our freedom not to sin.

Does life without God look like freedom to you? Look more closely. There is no worse slavery than slavery to sin.

People tend to believe lies that reinforce their own selfish, personal beliefs. Today, more than ever, we need to be careful about the input we allow to form our beliefs. With TV, music, movies, and the rest of the media often presenting sinful life-styles and unwholesome values, we find ourselves constantly bombarded by attitudes and beliefs that are totally opposed to the Bible.

Be careful about what you allow to form your opinions. The Bible is the only standard of truth. Evaluate all other opinions in light of its teachings.

God's plan for natural sexual relationships is his ideal for his creation. Unfortunately, sin distorts the natural use of God's gifts. Sin often means not only denying God, but also denying the way we are made.

When people say that any sex act is acceptable as long as nobody gets hurt, they are fooling themselves. In the long run (and often in the short run), sin hurts people—individuals, families, and whole societies. How sad it is that people who worship the things God made instead of the Creator so often distort and destroy the very things they claim to value!

Homosexuality (to exchange or abandon natural relations of sex) was as widespread in Paul's day as it is in ours. Many pagan practices encouraged it. God is willing to receive anyone who comes to him in faith, and Christians should love and accept others no matter what their background.

Yet, homosexuality is strictly forbidden in Scripture (Leviticus 18:22). Even some churches consider homosexuality an acceptable practice by many in our world today—.

But society does not set the standard for God's law. Many homosexuals believe that their desires are normal and that they have a right to express them. But God does not obligate nor encourage us to fulfill all our desires (even normal ones). Those desires that violate his laws must be controlled.

If you have these desires, you can and must resist acting upon them. Consciously avoid places or activities you know will kindle temptations of this kind. Don't underestimate the power of Satan to tempt you, nor the potential for serious harm if you yield to these temptations.

Remember, God can and will forgive sexual sins just as he forgives other sins. Surrender yourself to the grace and mercy of God, asking him to show you the way out of sin and into the light of his freedom and his love. Prayer, Bible study, and strong support in a Christian church can help you to gain strength to resist these powerful temptations.

If you are already deeply involved in homosexual behavior, seek help from a trustworthy, professional, pastoral counselor.

How were these people aware of God's death penalty? Human beings, created in God's image, have a basic moral nature and a conscience.

This truth is understood beyond religious circles. Psychologists, for example, say that the rare person who has no conscience has a serious personality disorder that is extremely difficult to treat.

Most people instinctively know when they do wrong—but they may not care.

Some people will even risk an early death for the freedom to indulge their desires now. "I know it's wrong, but I really want it," they say; or, "I know it's dangerous, but it's worth the risk."

For such people, part of the "fun" is going against God's law, the community's moral standards, common sense, or their own sense of right and wrong. But deep down inside they know that sin deserves the punishment of death (Romans 6:23).

## Trusting in God's choices for you

## **Romans 9:12-14**

Not according to our good or bad works.) She was told, "The descendants of your older son will serve the descendants of your younger son." [13] In the words of the Scriptures, "I loved Jacob, but I rejected Esau."

What can we say? Was God being unfair? Of course not!

Was it right for God to choose Jacob, the younger, to be over Esau? In Malachi 1:2-3, the statement "Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated" refers to the nations of Israel and Edom rather than to the individual brothers.

God chose Jacob to continue the family line of the faithful because he knew his heart was for God. But he did not exclude Esau from knowing and loving him. Keep in mind the kind of God we worship: he is sovereign; he is not arbitrary; in all things he works for our good; he is trustworthy; he will save all who believe in him. When we understand these qualities of God, we know that his choices are good even if we don't understand all his reasons.

Decisions become easier when your will to please God outweighs your will to please yourself!

## Does my choice help my witness for Christ?

#### 1 Cor. 9:19-22

This means I am not bound to obey people just because they pay me, yet I have become a servant of everyone so that I can bring them to Christ.

When I am with the Jews, I become one of them so that I can bring them to Christ. When I am with those who follow the Jewish laws, I do the same, even though I am not subject to the law, so that I can bring them to Christ.

When I am with the Gentiles who do not have the Jewish law, I fit in with them as much as I can. In this way, I gain their confidence and bring them to Christ. But I do not discard the law of God; I obey the law of Christ.

When I am with those who are oppressed, I share their oppression so that I might bring them to Christ. Yes, I try to find common ground with everyone so that I might bring him or her to Christ.

Paul asserts that he has freedom to do anything. In 1 Cor. 9:24-27 he emphasizes a life of strict discipline.

The Christian life involves both freedom and discipline. The goals of Paul's life were to glorify God and bring people to Christ. Thus he stayed free of any philosophical position or material entanglement that might sidetrack him, while he strictly disciplined himself to carry out his goal.

For Paul, both freedom and discipline were important tools to be used in God's service.

Paul gives several important principles for ministry:

- (1) Find common ground with those you contact;
- (2) Avoid a know-it-all attitude;
- (3) Make others feel accepted;
- (4) Be sensitive to their needs and concerns; and
- (5) Look for opportunities to tell them about Christ. These principles are just as valid for us as they were for Paul.

Am I motivated by a desire to help others to know Christ?

#### 1 Cor. 10:33

That is the plan I follow, too. I try to please everyone in everything I do. I don't just do what I like or what is best for me, but what is best for them so they may be saved.

Paul's criterion for all his actions was not what he liked best, but what was best for those around him. The opposite attitude would be:

- (1) Being insensitive and doing what we want, no matter who is hurt by it;
- (2) Being oversensitive and doing nothing, for fear that someone may be displeased;
- (3) Being a "yes person" by going along with everything, trying to gain approval from people rather than from God.

In this age of "my first" and "looking out for number one," Paul's startling statement is a good standard. If we make the good of others one of our primary goals, we will develop a serving attitude that pleases God.



Does it help me do my best?

#### 1 Cor. 9:25

All athletes practice strict self-control. They do it to win a prize that will fade away, but we do it for an eternal prize.

At times we must even give up something good in order to do what God wants. Each person's special duties determine the discipline and denial that he or she must accept. Without a goal, discipline is nothing but self-punishment. With the goal of pleasing God, our denial seems like nothing compared to the eternal, imperishable reward that will be ours.

## Is it against a specific command in Scripture and Would thus cause me to sin?

## 1 Cor. 10:12

If you think you are standing strong, be careful, for you, too, may fall into the same sin. But remember that the temptations that come into your life are no different from what others experience.

And God is faithful. He will keep the temptation from becoming so strong that you can't stand up against it. When you are tempted, he will show you a way out so that you will not give in to it.

In a culture filled with moral depravity and sin-inducing pressures, Paul gave strong encouragement to the Corinthians about temptation. He said:

- (1) Wrong desires and temptations happen to everyone, so don't feel you've been singled out;
- (2) Others have resisted temptation, and so can you;
- (3) Any temptation can be resisted because God will help you resist it.

## God helps you resist temptation by helping you

- (1) Recognize those people and situations that give you trouble,
- (2) Run from anything you know is wrong,
- (3) Choose to do only what is right,
- (4) Pray for God's help, and
- (5) Seek friends who love God and can offer help when you are tempted.

Running from a tempting situation is your first step on the way to victory (see 2 Tim. 2:22).

#### 2 Tim. 2:22

Run from anything that stimulates youthful lust. Follow anything that makes you want to do right. Pursue faith and love and peace, and enjoy the companionship of those who call on the Lord with pure hearts.

Running away is sometimes considered cowardly. But wise people realize that removing themselves physically from temptation often can be the most courageous action to take.

Timothy, a young man, was warned to flee anything that produced evil thoughts.

Do you have a recurring temptation that is difficult to resist? Remove yourself physically from any situation that stimulates your desire to sin. Knowing when to run is as important in spiritual battle as knowing when and how to fight.

#### 1 Tim. 6:11

But you, Timothy, belong to God; so run from all these evil things, and follow what is right and good. Pursue a godly life, along with faith, love, perseverance, and gentleness.

Paul uses active and forceful verbs to describe the Christian life: flee, pursue, fight, and take hold. Some think Christianity is a passive religion that advocates waiting for God to act. But we must have an *active* faith, obeying God with courage and doing what we know is right.

Is it time for action on your part? Don't wait—get going!



## Is it the best and most beneficial course of action?

#### 1 Cor. 10:22

What? Do you dare to rouse the Lord's jealousy as Israel did? Do you think we are stronger than he is?

Sometimes it's hard to know when to defer to the weaker believer. Paul gives a simple rule of thumb to help in making the decision—we should be sensitive and gracious.

While some actions may not be wrong, they may not be in the best interest of others. While we have freedom in Christ, we shouldn't exercise our freedom at the cost of hurting a Christian brother or sister.

We are not to consider only ourselves, but we must be sensitive to others. For more on the proper attitude toward a weaker believer, see the notes on

Am I thinking only of myself, or do I truly care about the other person?

#### 1 Cor. 10:24

Don't think only of your own good. Think of other Christians and what is best for them.

While we have freedom in Christ, we shouldn't exercise our freedom at the cost of hurting a Christian brother or sister. We are not to consider only ourselves, but we must be sensitive to others. For more on the proper attitude toward a weaker believer, see the notes on

# Am I acting lovingly or selfishly? And does it glorify God?

#### 1 Cor. 10:28-31

But suppose someone warns you that this meat has been offered to an idol. Don't eat it, out of consideration for the conscience of the one who told you.

It might not be a matter of conscience for you, but it is for the other person.

Now, why should my freedom be limited by what someone else thinks? If I can thank God for the food and enjoy it, why should I be condemned for eating it? Whatever you eat or drink or whatever you do, you must do all for the glory of God.

Why should we be limited by another person's conscience? Simply because we are to do all things for God's glory, even our eating and drinking. Nothing we do should cause another believer to stumble.

We do what is best for others, so that they might be saved. On the other hand, Christians should not make a career out of being the weaker person with oversensitive consciences. Christian leaders and teachers should carefully teach about the freedom we have in matters not expressly forbidden by Scripture.

God's love must so permeate our motives that all we do will be for his glory. Keep this as a guiding principle by asking, "Is this action glorifying God?" or "How can I honor God through this action?"

#### Will it cause someone else to sin?

1 Cor. 10:32

Don't give offense to Jews or Gentiles or the church of God.

All of us make hundreds of choices every day. Most choices have no right or wrong attached to them—like what you wear or what you eat. But we always face decisions that carry a little more weight. We don't want to do wrong, and we don't want to cause others to do wrong, so how can we make such choices?

## How prayer helps in making the right choices

Neh. 1:5

Then I said, "O Lord, God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps his covenant of unfailing love with those who love him and obey his commands,

God's "covenant of love" refers to God's promise to love the descendants of Abraham. It is also mentioned in Deut. 7:7-9.

Nehemiah fasted and prayed for several days, expressing his sorrow for Israel's sin and his desire that Jerusalem would again come alive with the worship of the one true God. Nehemiah demonstrated the elements of effective prayer:

- (1) Praise,
- (2) Thanksgiving,
- (3) Repentance,
- (4) Specific request, and
- (5) Commitment.

## Heartfelt prayers like Nehemiah's can help clarify

- (1) Any problem you may be facing,
- (2) God's great power to help you, and
- (3) The job you have to do.

By the end of his prayer time, Nehemiah knew what action he had to take (Neh. 1:11). When God's people pray, difficult decisions fall into proper perspective, and appropriate actions follow.

#### Acts 1:12-13

The apostles were at the Mount of Olives when this happened, so they walked the half-mile back to Jerusalem. Then they went to the upstairs room of the house where they were staying. Here is the list of those who were present:

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Peter,
John,
James,
Andrew,
Philip,
Thomas,
Bartholomew,
Matthew,
James (son of Alphaeus),
Simon (the Zealot),
and Judas (son of James).
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After Christ was taken up into heaven, the disciples immediately returned to Jerusalem and had a prayer meeting.

Jesus had said they would be baptized with the Holy Spirit in a few days, so they waited and prayed. When you face a difficult task, an important decision, or a baffling dilemma, don't rush into the work and just hope it comes out the way it should. Instead, your first step should be to pray for the Holy Spirit's power and guidance.

"Zealot" could mean anyone zealous for the Jewish law. The Zealots may have been a radical political party working for the violent overthrow of Roman rule in Israel.



Principles for making sound choices

## **Proverbs 18:13**

What a shame, what folly, to give advice before listening to the facts!

## **Proverbs 18:15**

Intelligent people are always open to new ideas. In fact, they look for them.

## **Proverbs 18:17**

Any story sounds true until someone sets the record straight.

In these concise statements, there are three basic principles for making sound choices:

- (1) Get the facts before answering;
- (2) Be open to new ideas;

(3) Make sure you hear both sides of the story before judging.

All three principles center on seeking additional information. This is difficult work, but the only alternative is prejudice—judging before getting the facts.

## Identify your motives when making proper choices

#### **Proverbs 21:2**

People may think they are doing what is right, but the Lord examines the heart.

People can find an excuse for doing almost anything, but God looks behind the excuses to the motives of the heart. We often have to make choices in areas where the right action is difficult to discern.

We can help ourselves make such decisions by trying to identify our motives first and then asking, "Would God be pleased with my real reasons for doing this?"

It is not God's plan to do good deeds only to receive something in return.

## **Following Christ requires difficult choices**

## Matthew 9:9

As Jesus was going down the road, he saw Matthew sitting at his tax-collection booth. "Come, be my disciple," Jesus said to him. So Matthew got up and followed him.

Matthew was a Jew who was appointed by the Romans to be the area's tax collector. He collected taxes from the citizens as well as from merchants passing through town.

Tax collectors were expected to take a commission on the taxes they collected, but most of them overcharged and kept the profits. Thus, tax collectors were hated by the Jews because of their reputation for cheating and because of their support of Rome.

When Jesus called Matthew to be one of his disciples, Matthew got up and followed, leaving a lucrative career. When God calls you to follow or obey him, do you do it with as much abandon as Matthew?

Sometimes the decision to follow Christ requires difficult or painful choices. Like Matthew, we must decide to leave behind those things that would keep us from following Christ.

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