

Standing at the Crossroads

***A Study of Christian
Moral Decision-Making
by Ray Higgins***



***Four Study Sessions for Individuals or Groups
(Revised and Expanded)***

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SUGGESTIONS FOR USING THIS STUDY GUIDE

Standing at the Crossroads: A Study of Christian Moral Decision-Making is a four-week study designed to aid Christians in making sound, biblically based decisions.

This guide can be used by a:

- Bible study class,
- Small group,
- Churchwide seminar,
- Weekend retreat or for
- Individual self-study.

The study is practical and easy to use.

Each session has a study guide for class participants and a leader's guide for the teacher.

The leader's guide engages Scriptures related to the corresponding study guide session. It is designed to assist the group leader in helping the class better understand and apply the material from each session. The questions at the end of each session guide will prompt discussion (and individual reflection).

Participants should read each study guide session ahead of time. The group leader should read both the study and leader's guide in advance, using both to better teach the class.

INTRODUCTION

On a summer evening, we had to make an on-the-spot decision. Glenn Hewitt and I had just eaten dinner at our employer's expense and walked out of the restaurant. We were walking down a main street sidewalk in an affluent suburb when we saw a man walking toward us who had the genuine look of poverty drawn all over him.

As we came together, the poor man interrupted our conversation with the question, "Would you give me 50 cents?"

One of us dug into a pocket, pulled out two quarters and gave them to the man. The other shook his head, "no."

Being asked for money is, unfortunately, a common situation in our country. What was unusual about our experience?

Both of us carry a Ph.D. degree in ethics; we have studied ethics carefully – its values and issues. Both of us have been employed as ethics professors, teaching moral decision-making. Both of us are Christian ethicists; we want to follow the moral teachings of Jesus.

Yet, we responded in two different ways. Not slightly different. Totally different.

What Would You Do?

What would you do if you were with us that evening? Would you give the poor man money? Would you say to him, "Come with us; your supper is on me." Would you talk with him about being a Christian? Would you ask him to tell you about himself? Would you cross the street when you saw him coming?

Once we were on our way again, what would you tell us about how you came to your decision and what reasons you had for making it? Would you second-guess with us about what the right decision was? Would you wonder with us how we could have made a better decision?

We Learn to Make Better Decisions

Making right decisions does not come automatically. Although we are constantly making decisions – trivial and serious, simple and complicated – many people receive little, if any, real training in decision-making.

A teacher shows us how to read, to write and to calculate. A musician teaches us to sing and to play an instrument. A coach teaches us to hit the ball with a bat, to catch the ball with a glove and to throw the ball to the right player.

Typically, we learn to make decisions – such as whether to give 50 cents to a poor person on the street – by watching others, by family traditions or by trial and error.

What is Decision-Making?

We need two skills in order to make good decisions. We must understand our situation accurately, and we must know what the values are in that situation. When the poor man asked my friend and me for 50 cents, we made our decisions based upon our understanding of our situation and the values in it.

In order to understand our situation, my friend and I needed an accurate reading of the facts – what was happening. What did the man look like? Did the man ask us for something? What did he ask us for? Did we hear him? Did each of us hear him say the same thing? Did we have 50 cents in our pockets, or were we carrying nothing smaller than a \$5 bill in our wallets?

In order to respond appropriately to this man, my friend and I needed to identify the values that were present in his request for 50 cents.

What are our values about “street people”? What are our values about poverty? What are our values about giving money to strangers?

What are our values about strangers asking us for money? What are our values about doing things for people whom we do not know? What value do we place on the money we have in our pockets?

Because my friend and I each made a very quick decision, we were not able to think through all of these questions. We simply made our decisions based upon the facts and values that came to our minds at the time and how we interpreted those facts and values. How do we account for our different decisions? Either we read the situation differently, or we held different values about how to respond to a person who asks for 50 cents.

What is Christian about Decision-Making?

Do Christians make better decisions than non-Christians? Not necessarily. Christians are not automatically better decision-makers than other persons. Tragically, history is littered with wrong decisions made by Christians.

Can non-Christians make good decisions? Yes. Every person, non-believer and believer, has some ability to choose what is right and to do good. God creates everyone in the image of God (Genesis 1:27) and God reveals the divine will through creation that everyone is able to see (Romans 1:19-21).

As a result, non-believers can make decisions that agree with God's standards, they can make the same good decisions that Christians make, and they can even make decisions that Christians should have made.

What, then, is different about Christian decision-making?

A Christian makes decisions *as a Christian*. The reasons for our decisions and motives behind our decisions are based on our relationship to Christ.

We draw on the Christian heritage that provides us with four powerful resources for becoming better decision-makers:

- Our personal relationship with God transforms us.
- We measure our decisions by a set of biblical values.
- We become members of God's family and participate with fellow believers in the life of the church.
- We learn from the Christian heritage and the lives of God's people who tried to make faith-filled decisions during their lives.

We make many decisions on the spot. This makes it look like we can make good decisions automatically. We cannot.

Good decision-making is learned. We learn to interpret correctly what is happening, to evaluate the values that exist in a specific situation and to draw on the resources that help us discover what God's will is in that particular time and place.

SESSION ONE: OVERCOMING THE OBSTACLES

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him and he will make your paths straight. – Proverbs 3:4-6

Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls. – Jeremiah 6:16

When it comes to buying presents for others, people seem to struggle with almost every obstacle to good decision-making.

They have trouble getting started. Since they may not be aware of what relatives or friends want and need, they must rely on a guess. They either take too long to decide and miss a good buy, or they decide too quickly and get the wrong thing.

They get stuck in knowing what to choose. Their wild idea becomes the main point. They depend too much on others to help in the decision. Because they want to buy the present on their own, they may refuse to ask for help. They fear making a wrong decision. They become overwhelmed by too many factors.

What makes decision-making hard for you? No one glides through the process. Everyone struggles with obstacles. Making better decisions requires awareness of the obstacles that plague you and using strategies to overcome them.

1. Getting Started

Making decisions would be easy for some people if they could only find a way to get out of the starting block. What chains them in place? Their decision is unclear or complicated. They are unaware of available resources, are unable to work the decision through a process or are afraid of making the wrong choice.

Practical strategies can be developed to overcome this obstacle. Through talking about the decision with other people, such as experts and friends, you can bring it into clear focus, simplify some of the tough issues, identify resources and outline a workable plan.

What decisions do you have trouble getting started on? The decision to:

- Save money?
- Write a last will and testament?
- Implement an attitude or action that would improve your marriage?
- Compose a “Living Will” so that your physician and family will know your wishes should you become unconscious or terminally ill?

2. Relying on a Guess

Sometimes we have to make a decision based on guessing what the right choice is. We call this “intuition.” Intuition ranges from an educated guess to a wild hunch. Typical decisions that are made on a guess include:

- When we have to make a decision immediately: a physician or nurse in the emergency room, or a referee in a basketball game.
- When we have procrastinated until our time for deciding is up: who to vote for in a political election.
- When we do not have enough information to feel like we can make an “educated” decision: setting up an investment account, buying a new car or beginning a new career.

This obstacle affects people who lack confidence in their intuition, especially when they face a decision with serious consequences. Which decisions do you have difficulty making because you have to guess at them more than other decisions?

3. Going Too Slow or Too Fast

Timing has to do with how slow or how fast we make a decision. Some people have a tendency to rush their decisions. Other people have a tendency to take too long to decide.

Either problem is an obstacle to making good decisions. What factors govern our speed in making decisions?

- Whether we have made a decision like this one before.
- How confident we feel about making this decision.
- How drastic the consequences of the decision are.

Some of the decisions in which our timing plays a crucial role include setting up a retirement account, buying a house at the right interest rate, planning when to have children and making a move to another job.

4. Getting Stuck

Sometimes we sail smoothly through the process and then crash into a concrete wall. We cannot get a piece of information we need, or we are afraid to trust a prediction. The complexity of the problem overwhelms us.

Based on my previous experiences working as a pastor, a chaplain and a medical ethicist, I have found that families frequently get stuck when they are asked about turning off life support equipment that is only prolonging their loved one’s dying.

How can you get unstuck? One idea is to get away from the decision for a while and to do something that is unrelated. Or, you may find that changing your setting, such as taking a walk, helps you see the dilemma from new angles. Inviting a trusted friend into the process can lift you out of the mire.

When you experience getting stuck, remember that we are never perfect decision-makers and are never in complete control of our circumstances. We never know all we need to know and never have all the power to make everything work out as we wish. It is good to remember Proverbs 3:5-6: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.”

5. Missing the Main Point

Too often we miss the main point. We focus on the secondary rather than the primary issues of the problem. We concentrate on the outer rings of the target rather than sighting the bull’s eye.

Why do we miss the point? Sometimes it is due to our inexperience in making decisions or the complexity of the decision.

Getting married seems to be one of the decisions where people often miss the main point. Young people lack experience and often do not receive proper guidance in making such a complicated and life-changing decision. They really do not know what it means to commit themselves to another person for life. They choose their spouse without knowing what the main reason ought to be or by thinking that their motive is the main point.

As a result, we often hear a husband or wife say, “I married her or him for the wrong reasons.” What they now call the wrong reasons used to be the main point.

6. Being Unaware of Blind Spots

Everyone has blind spots. No one sees all aspects of the situation or identifies all of the values.

Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder gives an example of people’s blind spots when they are asked, “What would you do if someone physically threatened you or your family?”

In his book, *What Would You Do?* Yoder describes how people lock themselves into one response: use violence to defend yourself, your loved one and innocent people. He points out that we fail to see and take seriously the nonviolent options at our disposal.

These options include “disarming” the aggressor by being friendly, by being assertive in a non-violent way, by being calm, by praying or by talking to Jesus. According to Yoder, these options could not only be safer but also are always more Christian than using violence as the way to overcome violence.

7. Being Too Dependent on Others

Dependency is wanting someone else to make our decisions for us. Why do we want to pass our decisions off to someone else? When we believe that a decision will hurt us, we are more likely to want someone else either to make the decision for us or, at the least, “go in with us” on the decision.

We also want others to help us decide when we doubt our ability to make good decisions. The more insecure we are about ourselves, the more likely we are to punt the decision to others.

Finally, we become too dependent on others when we trust another person’s ability to make decisions more than we believe in ourselves.

The way to overcome the obstacle of over-dependent behavior is to become more confident in our own decision-making ability. We can accomplish this goal through training.

While improving our self-confidence, be more careful about seeing other people as perfect decision-makers. Most of all, develop the faith that God’s Spirit is present in our lives to guide and empower us to become a better decision-maker.

8. Refusing to Ask for Help

While some people depend too much on others, another group struggles with the opposite obstacle. They refuse to ask for help. They reject the wisdom of others because they believe that “I alone am competent to make the best decisions” or that “I always make the right decisions.”

A common example is not asking for directions when traveling. How many miles do we have to drive before we break down and ask someone for help? Why do we refuse to ask others who should know when it is obvious that we do not know?

A way to overcome the obstacle of refusing to ask for help is to recognize that there is nothing wrong in asking others to help us. Asking for help is not a sign of stupidity. Not asking for help is really a sign of arrogance.

The fact that we need each other is a theme that runs throughout the Bible. We especially need others to make good decisions because others may have wrestled with the same question or may help us see our situation more clearly.

9. Fearing an Imperfect Decision

Perfectionism is the belief that every decision we face includes a sinless option and, furthermore, that we are capable of making the perfect choice.

Christians who believe in a perfect choice often refer to Paul's teaching about God providing a way of escape when temptation comes (1 Corinthians 10:13). God will give one pure option and not leave you with only tainted choices. Among people who hold this view, there is often disagreement about what the perfect decision is!

Some Christians question perfectionism because they believe it overlooks our finiteness and sinfulness, not to mention that we live in an imperfect world. Instead of making perfect decisions, Christians really choose the greater good or the lesser of evils. According to this view, every decision has a mixture of good and bad in it. If the options have more good than bad, then choose the greater good. If the options have more bad than good, then select the lesser of evils.

Perfectionism is often an obstacle in choosing a church home. People "church shop" for years or "church hop" frequently because they are searching for a church without any flaws. There are no perfect churches. The best decision may have some imperfections but it can still be the right decision.

10. Being Overwhelmed by Too Many Factors

A more sophisticated world makes decisions more complicated. While some people thrive on the challenge of complex decisions, others are intimidated and refuse to get involved.

Some of the global issues we face illustrate how mind-boggling our decisions are. For example, when and how should nations intervene when different groups in unstable countries are slaughtering or starving others? Should the military be sent? Should creative dialogue be pursued? Should peacekeepers be dispatched? Should embargoes be enforced? Should other nations stand back and watch?

Not only global issues, but also many personal issues are overloaded with numerous factors. Deciding how to invest our finances, how to educate our children or who to vote for in an election involves many factors.

Summary

One of the most effective ways to make better decisions is to know the obstacles with which you struggle. Which obstacles hinder you the most? Which obstacles never get in your way? Which obstacles do other people in your group find challenging?

SESSION TWO: USE THE BIBLE

All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work. – 2 Timothy, 3:16-17, NSRV

Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path. – Psalm 119:105

I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you. – Psalm 119:11

During the Persian Gulf War, the Iraqis launched missiles into Israel. Israelis feared that they might be carrying biological or chemical weapons. In the areas where these missiles landed, Jewish men with beards faced a decision: shave their beards so that the gas masks would fit tightly, or leave their beards and wear loose fitting gas masks.

Why was this such a serious decision? Because Leviticus 19:27 gives the command: “Do not cut the hair at the sides of your head or clip off the edges of your beard.”

Three decisions were made. Some shaved their beards so the gas masks would fit snugly. Others left their beards alone, knowing the gas masks would be useless. A third group trimmed their beards just enough for the gas masks to fit.

This event illustrates well that people use Scripture to help them make decisions. It also shows how people use the Bible.

Even when the Bible gives specific instructions, as it does in many places, biblical interpreters still have to ask two questions: Does it still apply to today? And, how does it apply to today?

Here are *six crucial guidelines* for interpreting the Bible more authentically:

1. Identity the Bible’s Purpose

For Christians, the Bible is indispensable for decision-making. We believe the Bible is God’s revelation, but our consensus breaks down on how the Bible relates to decision-making. Christians choose among *three options*.

Some Christians see the Bible as a *textbook* on decision-making. It teaches Christians how to make decisions. We see how God’s people made decision at various times. Gideon used a wool fleece to discover God’s will (Judges 6:36-40), and the disciples used prayer and casting lots to determine Judas’ replacement (Acts 1:21-26).

Although the Bible tells us about people’s decisions and something about how they made them, it is not a textbook on decision-making. It was written to help us decide to place our faith in God and to live in ways that please God.

Some Christians see the Bible as the *answer book* for every decision. It tells Christians what decisions to make. According to this approach, physicians should use the Bible to make decisions about how to find the genetic cause of cystic fibrosis, and lawyers should use the Bible to answer legal questions in their practice.

The problem with this view is that the Bible does not give answers to every decision we face. For example, the Bible does not address the use of the media or medical technology. The Bible does provide answers to questions of spiritual faith and how to live a faithful life through one's relationship to God, other people and creation.

Some Christians see the Bible as the collected *accounts* of how people made decisions and the decisions that they made. It provides examples of the kinds of decisions Christians should and should not make by showing us the kinds of decisions God's people made in the past.

Consider how you use the Bible. Which of these fits your decision-making approach?

2. Look at the Bible's Authority

When I watch Christians make decisions and I read what Christians write about decision-making, I have discovered that we use the Bible as our authority in different ways.

According to *one approach*, only the Bible is our authority. The Bible is the only means God uses to communicate to us the decisions that we should make. We cannot depend upon friends, experts in various subjects, our intelligence or even prayer to guide us in decision-making.

A *second approach* believes the Bible and other sources are our authority. God uses a variety of ways to communicate to us the decisions that we should make. The Bible is one way among many that God uses to guide us. The Bible is helpful in decision-making; but there are other sources, such as experts, nature, reason, our experience and prayer, which, at times, take precedent over the Bible.

A *third approach* says the Bible is our primary authority for decision-making. God uses a variety of ways to communicate to us the decisions we should make, including nature, reason, experience, prayer, other people and information. Among these, the Bible is the primary standard for decision-making.

According to this use of the Bible, a physician's perspectives on the meaning and value of life, death, health, illness and diagnosing disease, prescribing medications and performing surgery are learned through medical school.

This third view of the Bible's authority is the most helpful. It acknowledges God's guidance through *special revelation* (in the Bible) and God's guidance through *general revelation* (in the world and through others). Information from general revelation is evaluated by using information from special revelation (the Bible).

Think back to an important decision you made. What was the key reason for your decision? Was it a passage of Scripture? Was it the advice of an expert? Was it the counsel of a friend? Was it the quiet voice of your conscience?

3. Find Out What the Bible Teaches

In college, Clarence Jordan volunteered for ROTC and felt called to be a preacher, so he combined ROTC training and Bible reading. When Jordan graduated from college in 1933, he headed for six weeks of ROTC summer camp in northern Georgia. Dallas Lee reports in his book, *The Cotton Patch Evidence*, that on his way to ROTC camp, Jordan reflected on Scripture passages that he had been memorizing. He was especially fascinated by the Sermon on the Mount.

The drill one day consisted of riding a horse through the woods with a pistol and saber. Each soldier was supposed to shoot his pistol at the cardboard dummies and stick the straw dummies with his saber.

As Jordan shot and stuck the dummies, a verse kept coming to mind: "Love your enemies." When he left the woods, he rode straight to the commanding officer, resigned his commission and returned to his church to be licensed to preach.

In the heat of battle practice, Jordan made his decision based on what he believed that the Bible taught – being in the military was incompatible with following Jesus. He went on to earn a doctoral degree in New Testament Greek from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, to found a Christian community named Koinonia Farm and to write a paraphrase of some New Testament books called *The Cotton Patch Version*.

In making decisions, Christians can use *four questions* to help them understand what the Bible teaches and how its teachings ought to be used in making decisions.

The *first question* is: What does the Bible teach us about who God is? God's qualities include love, holiness, justice, righteousness, mercy, compassion, patience, anger and grace. These divine characteristics are the standard by which we measure our decisions.

The *second question* is: What does the Bible teach us about who God expects us to be? The Old Testament teaches God's people to be holy, obedient and faithful.

The Beatitudes describe Christians as poor, mournful, meek, righteousness-seekers, merciful, pure in heart, peacemakers and joyful in persecution (Matthew 5:3-12). The Fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). These qualities, and others found in the Bible, are the standard by which God measures who we ought to be.

The *third question* is: What does the Bible teach us about what God values? God values all creation and every person. God values faith, integrity, freedom with responsibility, honesty and generosity. God values family, government, church, and, most of all, the Kingdom of God.

The *fourth question* is: What does the Bible teach us about what God expects us to value? Micah reports that the Lord requires us “to act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8). Jesus commands us to love God, our neighbor, ourselves and our enemies (Matthew 22:37-39; 5:44). Our Lord also instructs us to place eternal values higher than temporal values (Matthew 6:19-21; Luke 9:25). Paul tells Christians to think about “whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable,” whatever is excellent and praiseworthy (Philippians 4:8).

4. Use the Whole Bible

When Christians use the Bible in decision-making, we often go to familiar passages. We have favorite verses. We remember some verses and forget others. We have found some verses and have never looked at others. In order to interpret the Bible correctly, we need to use the entire Bible.

First, we need to identify all of the passages that speak to the decision we are making. Passages may address our decision in many different forms. An issue may be presented in the form of commands (Ten Commandments), law (Leviticus and Deuteronomy), propositional statements (Paul’s ethical teachings), stories (Ruth, Luke and Acts), parables (the Gospels), wisdom sayings (Proverbs), letters (Corinthians), hymns (Philippians 2:6-11) and apocalyptic literature (Daniel and Revelation).

Second, we need to use both the Old Testament (OT) and the New Testament (NT).

Christians view the two testaments differently:

- Both testaments are given equal weight.
- The OT is seen as greater than the NT.
- The NT is given greater emphasis than the OT – this is referred to as progressive revelation.
- An OT or NT perspective is completely omitted.

War and capital punishment are two issues that illustrate the ways Christians use both the Old and New Testaments. Those who support war and capital punishment tend to focus on the Old Testament, while Christians who oppose these two issues tend to focus on the four Gospels that record the life of Jesus.

5. Beware of Easy Answers

There are *four reasons* why using the Bible in decision-making does *not* always lead to easy answers.

First, God is involved in the world with people in varied situations and times. As you read both the Old and New Testaments, you see how closely God is involved in people's lives, individually and collectively. You also see how, over the many centuries covered by the Bible, times and situations changed.

For example, the Old Testament indicates about 25 crimes that should be punished by death. Wayne Howard and John Howard Yoder provide the list in their book *The Death Penalty Debate*. The crimes, spelled out in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy, relate to:

- *Religion*: idolatry, blaspheming the holy, breaking the Sabbath, false prophesy, sorcery, priests being drunk on duty and anyone but priests touching the tabernacle furniture.

- *Human Life*: murder, kidnapping, rape, keeping a dangerous ox, negligence leading to loss of life and sacrificing a child to Molech.
- *Sexuality*: adultery, incest, sex with a man, sex during menstruation, sex with an animal and prostitution by a priest's daughter.
- *Law*: false witness in a capital case and contemptuous disobedience to a court.
- *Family*: cursing or striking one's father or mother and being an incorrigible son.

Although most Christians in the U.S. support capital punishment, few would advocate its use in all of the above cases.

Second, God's people differ with one another in their understanding of what the Bible teaches.

We might expect Christians to hold different opinions on issues about which the Bible does not speak (e.g., medical technology). What we find is that genuine Christians even differ in their opinions on issues addressed directly by the Bible, such as war, divorce and wealth.

Third, Christians change their minds over time about what they believe the Bible teaches.

One clear example is the use of the Bible to justify slavery. I have noticed that this change of mind happens frequently on another issue – divorce and remarriage.

A person will take a strict stance against divorce and remarriage until that experience happens in his or her family. Or, a person will take a lenient stance on these issues until that experience happens to him or her.

Have you ever changed your mind about what you believed the Bible taught about an issue? At one time in the past, you believed that the Bible taught one thing. At a later time, you decided that the Bible taught something that was slightly or even radically different. Why did you change your mind – because of more Bible study or due to personal experience with the issue? How much did you change your mind – a little, or a lot?

Fourth, there are things that exist in our world today that the Bible does not specifically address: the media, nuclear warfare, medical technology and politics in a democracy. Just because the Bible does not address these issues does not mean that the Bible is irrelevant to them.

For example, the Bible does not tell us precisely when we cease to be alive in this world and pass into eternity. We use our medical knowledge to determine when physical death occurs.

In the past, we said death occurs when the heart ceases beating, when the person quits breathing or when the person's body temperature drops below a certain point.

Because we have technology that measures brain activity, the current definition of death now includes total brain death.

Are people who have been in a comatose state for five or more years dead or alive? Are babies born with anencephaly, a condition in which almost no brain exists, alive or dead?

The Bible does not specifically address these questions. So how do we use the Bible in these circumstances? We apply biblical values about life, death and suffering to our dilemma.

Christians are right in using medicine to improve the quality of life and to prolong life. But Christians should not make technology our god.

When we face dilemmas that are not addressed in the Bible, we need to realize that the connections we make and the conclusions we draw are personal opinions and not biblical mandates.

6. Know Your Biases

Christians too often identify their interpretations of the Bible as the Bible itself. Only the Bible is the Bible. Our statements about the Bible and its teachings are just that: our statements.

Our statements are influenced by who we are: gender, nationality, race, culture, historical time period, social class, occupation, economic status.

When using the Bible to make better decisions, *two events* occur:

First, the Bible shapes and influences our values and perspectives. We put our values under the scrutiny of Scripture and allow it to help us fine tune and correct our values.

Second, we interpret the Bible according to our own values and perspectives. Our cultural values end up influencing our interpretation of the Bible.

Both of these events occur when Christians read and interpret Scripture. Our interpretations are a mixture of God's revelation and our cultural biases.

The ways rich and poor people interpret the Bible's teachings about wealth illustrate this point. Some Christians see wealth as a sign of God's blessing. Other Christians believe wealthy people usually gain their wealth through some form of exploitation and keep their wealth because they are insensitive to the poor.

In the Bible, wealthy people were viewed as godly people, too. We also find warnings, especially by Jesus and James, that most people choose wealth as savior and lord rather than Jesus.

How can we overcome our biases when we interpret the Bible? We should pray for the Holy Spirit and fellow believers to reveal our biases to us. As we use the Bible in making a decision, we should make a list of the things we already believe about the issues involved in our decision.

Summary

As Christians, we do not measure the Bible by our values; we measure our standards by the Bible's teachings. The greatest threat, however, to our Christian integrity is to misinterpret the Bible, to make the Bible say more, less or something other than what it really says.

Therefore, we must work hard and pray continually in order to "correctly handle the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15). We must think through the purpose, authority, content, entirety and complexity of Scripture. And, we need to know what our biases are so that we will always evaluate them according to God's Word.

SESSION THREE: ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

Give your servant a discerning heart ... to distinguish between right and wrong – 1 Kings 3:9

*Be careful ... that the exercise of your rights does not become a stumbling block to the weak.
– 1 Corinthians 8:9*

*If we have sown spiritual good among you, is it too much if we reap material benefits? ...
Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Jesus Christ.
– 1 Corinthians 9:11-12, NRSV*

We were at soccer practice. I was standing on the sidelines watching my son, Adam, who was 4 at the time, run toward the ball. His teammates were heading toward it, too, from all directions. Just as Adam was about to bury his foot in the ball, Josh kicked it out from under him.

I saw Adam fall limp to the ground. I could hear him starting to cry. “Adam, what’s the matter?” I asked. He got up and we started walking toward one another. I bent over to listen to him. In between his crying sounds he said, “Dad, they are supposed to share.”

That day Adam taught me a lesson about ethics. His mother and I had been teaching him the value of sharing with others, especially with Ryan, his younger brother. What Adam had not learned, and what we had not explained to him, was that the rules in life change based upon the game you are playing. To share has one meaning on the soccer field and quite another meaning at home.

In order to make better decisions, we need to know the right questions to ask that will help us to see these nuances that Adam and I learned together on the soccer field.

The following seven questions help us understand what values are and how to work with them in such a way that we make good decisions.

1. Do I Understand Accurately the Situation?

If we do not have an accurate understanding of the situation, we may make the wrong decision. In order to make good decisions, it is crucial to have a correct idea of what happened.

How do we get an accurate view of the situation?

First, collect information. Use the six questions journalists ask in writing a story: who, what, where, when, why and how.

Second, find out who the players are in the situation and talk with as many of them as we can. Listen to their different points of view.

Third, evaluate the information we have collected based upon our search for what is true. Be aware of the ways our personal biases influence how we describe what happened.

Fourth, explore the available options. Brainstorm all of the different alternatives we can choose.

Once we understand clearly what happened, who was involved and what our options are, then we can begin to address the values that are present in the situation in order to make a proper decision.

A good example of the connection between knowing the situation and making the right decision comes when outsiders decide to intervene in arguments between spouses. Unless the outsider has an accurate understanding of their relationship with one another, the issues about which they disagree and their options for resolving them, the outsider will inevitably make their relationship worse rather than better.

Can you remember a decision you made based on an incorrect understanding of the situation involved? What was that decision?

What decision would you have made if you had understood the situation correctly?

2. What Are the Values in This Decision?

Once we understand what is going on, who is involved and what our options are, we can begin to identify the values that are present in the event or issue. For instance, marital disagreements occur when spouses disagree over what they value, what they believe is worthwhile. Making decisions that resolve the conflict means getting at the heart of what is important to them and why, and how they rank it among other values.

Christian values are determined by the moral values that we find in the Bible. These values are taught, for example, in the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17), in the Beatitudes (Matthew 5:3-12), in the two greatest commandments (Matthew 22:36-40) and in the passage on the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23).

When we assess our values, other people's values and the values that exist in any given situation, we use several terms for thinking about and talking about these values, including character, principles, rights and consequences.

3. What Is the Character of Those Involved in This Decision?

One of the most popular ways that we think about values is to make judgments about people's character based on their virtues (ethical traits) and vices (unethical traits).

A good example of this character approach to values is when we make decisions about popular persons, such as Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, regarding whether they are responsible or irresponsible public figures. It is interesting to see how different people can look at the same person and arrive at opposite conclusions about the character of that person.

We size up people's character, including our own, by looking at several personal qualities:

- *Personality traits* – such as being loving or hateful, patient or impatient, peaceful or angry, tolerant or intolerant.
- *Personal motives* – the reasons people have for making their decisions.
- *Personal needs* – the decisions people make in order to meet their needs, including food, shelter, sex and affirmation.
- *People's beliefs* – the convictions we hold about issues, situation and values.
- *People's experiences* – the events in life that a person has faced.

Each quality forms a part of our character. Someone has said, "Reputation is what others think you are; character is who you really are."

The New Testament teaches that there is such a thing as Christian character. Here are some of the ways it describes what Christian character is:

- We do not pattern our lives after "this world," but we are "transformed by the renewing of [our] mind[s]" (Romans 12:2).
- We do not live according to our "sinful nature," but we live "by the Spirit" and "with the Spirit" (Galatians 5:17, 25).
- We do not live according to our "former way of life" (Ephesians 4:22), but we become "a new creation" (2 Corinthians 5:17).
- We put off our "old self" and put on our "new self" (Ephesians 4:22, 24).
- We "set our mind on things above, not on earthly things" (Colossians 3:2).
- We take off our "old self with its practices" and "put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator" (Colossian 3:9-10).

Do you make decisions based on the character of the people involved in the decision? Can you describe a decision you made based on the virtues and vices of the people involved?

4. What Are the Principles in This Decision?

Another way we think about our values when we make decisions is to put them in the form of principles. Principles are moral guidelines that help us distinguish right from wrong. “Do to others what you would have them do to you” (Matthew 7:12) is an example of a biblical principle.

There are two types of principles in making decisions:

- Some principles are *absolutes*. That means they apply to everyone, everywhere, every time. There are no exceptions. For example, murder, adultery and rape are always wrong for everybody.
- Some principles are *prima facie*, which are the Latin words for “on first appearance.” Prima facie principles should be obeyed unless they come into conflict with a more important principle. When that happens, the more important principle should be followed.

An example of conflicting principles is the case of telling lies to save lives in Nazi Germany. In order to protect Jews, their protectors lied to the Nazis. They justified their action by saying that the principle of saving lives was more important, in this case, than the principle of telling the truth.

Today, we apply a similar rationale to the work of undercover police officers. We approve their telling lies, which is usually wrong, in order to catch criminals who sell drugs, sex or national security. If these same officers practice their art of lying with their families, then we say that they are acting immorally.

Do you use principles when you make decisions? What kind of principles do you use? How do you feel about making exceptions to principles?

5. What Rights Are Involved in This Decision?

Another way that we think about our values is to talk about them in terms of rights. When we value something very strongly we tend to talk about that value as a right. We are more likely to talk about values as rights when we think that what we believe in is being taken away.

For example, human life is a value. When human lives are being taken, we talk about the right to life. Death with dignity is a value. When medical technology is used to prolong people’s suffering and dying, we talk about the right to die. When a group believes that society is preventing them from expressing their opinions, they claim the right to free speech.

When people have a legitimate right to a particular value, other people must respond in one of two ways.

For example, if the right to health care is a *positive right*, it means that society should provide citizens with health care. If the right to health care is a *negative right*, then society is not obligated to provide health care, but it should not interfere with citizens' efforts to obtain health care.

If the right to free speech is a *positive right*, then it means society must help people express their opinions. If the right to free speech is a *negative right*, then it means society must not prevent people from expressing their opinions.

Although our society, including Christians, frequently uses the language of rights as a way of expressing its values, the Bible places more emphasis on the responsibilities that the people of God have toward others rather than their rights.

The Apostle Paul provides an interesting perspective on our rights as Christians in 1 Corinthians 8-9.

Do you talk about your values in terms of rights? What decisions have you made recently based upon rights? How often do you reflect on your responsibilities in conjunction with the discussion about your rights?

6. What Might Be the Consequences in This Decision?

Another way we talk about our values is to look at the consequences of our decisions. What will happen if I make decision A as opposed to decision B? When we talk about our values in light of the consequences, it is crucial to ask these six questions:

1. Which consequences are *beneficial* and which are *harmful*?

In some decisions, the good and the bad consequences are totally separate from one another. For example, in choosing between two jobs, one job may have all the benefits while the other job has only negative consequences. In many cases, each job has mixed consequences – some benefits and some harms.

2. Which consequences are *immediate* and which will occur in the *future*?

In some decisions, we may choose immediate consequences that we do not like in order to achieve a future result that we desire. For instance, an athlete must be totally committed to training in order to compete and win in the Olympics. The athlete is willing to trade some immediate consequences for a future result.

3. Which consequences will last only a *short time* and which will last a *long time*?

For example, people who decide to overuse prescription drugs experience the desired effect for a short time, but abusing prescription drugs has long-term negative consequences.

4. Will the consequences help me achieve an *ideal* or will they involve *compromise*?

We want to aim for pure and perfect consequences. Because we live in an imperfect and sinful world, we sometimes settle for what is the best realistic option.

I know Christian physicians who will not prescribe birth control methods for sexually active teenage girls because these doctors want to uphold the ideal that sexual intercourse is wrong outside of marriage. I also know Christian physicians who do prescribe contraceptives for these girls in order to reduce their chances of becoming pregnant and seeking an abortion.

In a perfect world, teenage youth would not engage in sexual intercourse outside of marriage. Choosing between ideal consequences and realistic consequences can be one of the toughest decisions we make.

5. How sure am I about what will happen, and do other people agree with my predictions?

When the U.S. military leaders decided to use atomic weapons in World War II, they had to consider whether the use of these weapons would make it easier for other countries to use them in the future. While doing something for the first time makes it easier for other people to make that same decision a second time, it may also be true that the consequences of using the atomic bomb were so horrible that its use reduced the chances of such a decision being made again.

6. How much of a factor in your decisions are the consequences, and how did the consequences sway you in making a recent decision?

Summary

In order to make better decisions, we should ask the right questions. The six questions in this lesson help us to look at our decisions, both the facts and the values, from as many angles as possible.

Hopefully, by running our decisions through each of these filters – situation, values, character, principles, rights and consequences – we will have more confidence in our ability to make the right decisions.

SESSION FOUR: BUILD A FRAMEWORK

Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. – Colossians 3:17

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. – Hebrews 12:1

Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together. – Hebrews 10:24-25

When you build a framework for decision-making, you draw on all of the basic resources for Christians. These five resources include one's personal relationship with Christ, the Bible, the Christian heritage, the church and the community.

Each resource provides Christians valuable insights about the decisions that we make. Whenever we omit any of these resources, we jeopardize the quality of our decisions.

1. Personal Relationship with Christ

The starting point for Christian decision-making is being a believer in Jesus Christ.

This divine-human relationship has three dimensions:

- *Our relationship to God* – “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30).
- *Our faith and trust in Jesus Christ* – “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Romans 10:9).
- *The presence of the Holy Spirit in the believer's life* – “We know that God lives in us: we know it by the Spirit he gave us” (1 John 3:24).

In Charles Sheldon's classic book *In His Steps*, he had the characters of the story ask a question before they made an important decision: “What would Jesus do?” It is a powerful question for Christians to ask when we consider a career, spend our money, allocate our time and energies, and encounter strangers.

Although the question is a good one, it does not mean that God expects us to do exactly what Jesus did. If that were true, then Christians would have to remain single, not own any property and not have a job other than to be full-time gospel messengers.

Another way to ask the question is, “In light of who I am and the time and circumstances in which I am living, what does Jesus want me to do in this specific situation?”

In the New Testament, we find several statements that provide us with guidelines for answering such questions. Christians:

- Deny themselves, take up their cross daily and follow Christ (Luke 9:23).
- Live their lives in such a way that it shows their faith in Christ (Matthew 25:31-46).
- Put to death their earthly nature (Colossians 3:5).
- Take off the old self and put on the new self (Ephesians 4:22-24; Colossians 3:9-10).
- Have the same attitude as Christ Jesus (Philippians 2:5).
- Walk in the light (1 John 1:7).
- Walk as Jesus walked (1 John 2:6).
- Are transformed by Christ into a new self (Colossians 3:9-10).
- Are “conformed to the likeness of God’s Son” (Romans 8:29).
- Are transformed by Christ rather than being conformed to the world (Romans 12:2).
- Live by the Spirit and produce the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:16-26).

2. Bible

Don Harbuck, my childhood pastor, told the story of his elderly mother who lived in a northern Louisiana town during the 1960s. Racial justice was the issue in her local Baptist congregation, in her community and all across the country.

One day Mrs. Harbuck was talking on the phone with one of her friends and the subject of race relations came up. The friend accused Mrs. Harbuck of “being liberal” on the race issue, asking: “Why are you for integrating our churches?” After a moment of silence, Mrs. Harbuck responded, “It’s because I read my Bible every day and talk to you once a week!”

Going to the Bible is at the heart of good decisions and right living. The Bible is our definitive written source for Christian decision-making because it tells us who God is and who we ought to be. It teaches us what God values and what we should value.

Even though the Bible does not give specific answers for every moral decision that Christians face, it provides the kinds of guidance that we cannot afford to do without. Even though Christians do not always agree on how to use the Bible or how to interpret the Bible, the Bible is our standard for making right decisions.

What are some ways you can study the Bible so that you can improve the decisions you make? What kinds of resources or activities would help you become a more accurate interpreter of God's Word?

3. Christian Heritage

Why were Christians of the second century against both war and abortion, while in the U.S. we often find Christians who are against war but not against abortion, and Christians who are against abortion but not against war? Is it sheer arrogance for Christians to believe that we can make Christian decisions by leaping from the first century to the 20th century?

Our Christian heritage provides us with a historical framework for Christian decision-making. We see how God has been at work in the lives of believers from the beginning to the present. We can learn from the kinds of decisions Christians made in every century as they struggled to do God's will regarding issues such as participation in war, obedience to the government and whether divorce and remarriage were permissible.

What decisions have you faced or are you facing for which you would like to have a Christian historical perspective?

4. Church

In August 1950, a Baptist church in Georgia tried to "church" members of Koinonia Farm from its fellowship. The church opposed the message of racial reconciliation that Koinonia promoted.

Baptist ethicist Henlee Barnette (1911 – 2004) tells in his book, *Clarence Jordan: Turning Dreams into Deeds*, how Jordan, a founder of Koinonia Farm and author of *The Cotton Patch Version*, met with the church's deacons to discuss the rising tension between the groups of Christians.

As the meeting began, Jordan handed a Bible to the deacon beside him and said: "Brethren, if I have violated any teaching of this book in my beliefs or conduct, I will withdraw quietly from this church fellowship. Please point to the text or teaching I have failed to try to live up to!"

The nervous deacon passed the Bible to the deacon next to him. Slowly, each deacon passed it to the next one until one deacon shattered the tense silence. "Brother Jordan, don't pull that Bible stuff on us!"

It is a tragedy that churches seem to invest more energy in being reactionary and negative than proactive and positive toward controversial issues in society.

Despite imperfections in denominations and churches, the local church is still a special channel for God's work in the world.

In fact, there is an obvious shift that occurs between the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament, God's people were a nation and God worked primarily through Israel.

In the New Testament, God's people are the church and God works primarily through the church. Unlike the nation of Israel, membership in the church crosses generations, cultures, nations and races.

Christian fellowship provides individual believers with collective wisdom for decision-making. Fellow Christians may have already worked through a similar decision. Other Christians can offer "objective" feedback by not being so close to, or overwhelmed by, the decision.

If churches are going to be "major players" in the decisions Christians make, then we will either need to spend more time with our church family or use the time that we spend with them in discussing what really matters in our faith journey.

As it is, most of us spend more time at other places and with other people. As a result, those places and people have more influence on us than our church does.

In order for churches to be a positive influence in our decisions, we will also need to trade the "lone ranger" individualism that our American culture promotes for the sense of community that the body of Christ symbolizes.

Instead of making decisions alone and not bringing them with us to church to discuss and seek the group's wisdom, we must envision our churches as close-knit communities of believers.

We make the journey through life together with a common identity, a common mission and a common set of values.

Churches have increased their impact in decision-making through Christian leaders who present their wisdom on contemporary issues to a wider audience through television, radio, DVDs, books, magazines, newsletters, websites, podcasts, films, music and dramatic performances.

What influence does your church have on the decisions you make? Which Christian leaders have helped shape your values and decisions?

5. Community

While Christian resources are essential to good decision-making, there are several other kinds of "community" resources that help Christians make better decisions.

Summary

Making better decisions occurs when we have a strong and stable framework. For the Christian, that framework includes our relationship with Christ, our knowledge of the Bible, our understanding of our Christian heritage, our participation in the church and our knowledge of and involvement in community resources. Using all of these resources will turn us in the right direction and into better decisions-makers.

1. *Academic disciplines*: If we are making political decisions, knowledge of political science is necessary. With legal decisions, knowledge of law is important. If we are making medical decisions, knowledge of medicine is vital. With decisions about our emotional well-being, knowledge of psychology is beneficial. The list goes on about the kinds of “academic” resources that give us insights into the decisions we face.

2. *Experts*: Listening to people who are experts on the economy, on people’s behavior and a host of other issues can give us valuable information.

3. *Organizations*: The number of support groups, special interest groups and think tanks continues to increase. These groups provide specific information and relationships for people who face particular kinds of decisions.

We should be wise in utilizing these resources, but we need not fear using them because God is at work in all areas of our world. God uses believers and non-believers to help us, the Bible and other writings to enlighten our minds, and the church as well as other groups and organizations to give us support and guidance.

What community resources would provide you information and insights for making better decisions?

TEN OBSTACLES TO BETTER DECISION-MAKING

1. Getting Started
2. Relying on a Guess
3. Going Too Slow or Too Fast
4. Getting Stuck
5. Missing the Main Point
6. Being Unaware of Blind Spots
7. Being Too Dependent on Others
8. Refusing to Ask for Help
9. Fearing an Imperfect Decision
10. Being Overwhelmed by Too Many Factors

SIX GUIDELINES FOR USING THE BIBLE IN DECISION-MAKING

1. Identify the Bible's Purpose
2. Look at the Bible's Authority
3. Find Out What the Bible Teaches
4. Use the Whole Bible
5. Beware of Easy Answers
6. Know Your Biases

SIX QUESTIONS FOR BETTER DECISION-MAKING

1. Do I Understand Accurately the Situation?
2. What Are the Values in This Decision?
3. What Is the Character of Those Involved in This Decision?
4. What Are the Principles in This Decision?
5. What Rights Are Involved in This Decision?
6. What Might Be the Consequences in This Decision?

FIVE RESOURCES FOR BETTER DECISION-MAKING

1. Personal Relationship with Christ
2. The Bible
3. Christian Heritage
4. The Church
5. The Community

YOU MIGHT ALSO ENJOY THE FOLLOWING BIBLE STUDIES:

Being Doers of the Word: This 13-lesson online Bible study uses the book of James to help people who profess faith to back it up with love-based actions – and to expect nothing in return. Lessons include: “Developing a Mature Faith,” “Being Doers of the Word” and “Pursuing Wisdom.” A [leader’s guide](#) and [student guide](#) are available for purchase.

Honoring the Ten Commandments: This 13-lesson online Bible study explores how people of faith can honor the Ten Commandments through lives that uphold them. Lessons include: “Toward a Moral Way of Life” and “Approaching the Ten Commandments with Care.” A [leader’s guide](#) and [student guide](#) are available for purchase.

Questions Jesus Asked: This 13-lesson online Bible study considers Jesus’ questions as recorded in the Gospel of Luke, exploring ethical issues that Jesus raised and showing how these same issues related to our lives today. Lessons include: “Who Is Your Neighbor?” “What Is Faithful Stewardship?” and “What Do You Owe the Government?” A [leader’s guide](#) and [student guide](#) are available for purchase.

OTHER AVAILABLE RESOURCES:

Different Books, Common Word: Baptists and Muslims: A documentary that reveals how Baptists and Muslims are changing history by the way they are engaging each other. Tired of being defined by extremists, some U.S. Baptist and Muslims have sought and found common ground: the common word in both traditions to love neighbor. Learn more about the film at DifferentBooksCommonWord.com.

Gospel Without Borders: A documentary that brings more light and less heat to the issue of immigration. It separates myth from fact, examines what the Bible says about treatment of the “stranger,” shows the experiences of documented and undocumented immigrants and provides handles for Christians to advance the common good. Learn more about the film at GospelWithoutBorders.net.

Through the Door: A documentary that highlights the faith community’s engagement with prisons (including inmates and officers, being in prison and out, both charity and justice). Learn more about the film at ThroughTheDoor.info.