

Better Choices

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[0 : 00] Welcome here for this Sunday, January 26, 2025. My name is Kent Dixon, and it's my joy to be the pastor here. It is always a treat to me to greet people when they come on Sunday mornings and to see you and to interact with you, and that's a blessing.

As Vern touched on, being blessed, the more they feel in their direction, I also feel the same. I feel like you are a great blessing to me. Two weeks ago, we began a new sermon series called Better. And I hope it's been shaping up to be meaningful to you. I've had several people come up to me and say, oh, it challenged me to think more about such and such, or I felt super convicted. How dare you? No, they didn't say how dare you. But we all have aspects of our life where we'd like to improve and become better. I believe that. And I hope that this new year has already been good to you.

I'm convinced that living a life with Jesus is the best way to live. And when we submit our lives to him, our lives can be better in every single way.

[1 : 05] Two weeks ago, we looked at the impact God can have in our lives when we submit to him. Our lives really can be better in every single way. And then when we put God first, the rest of our lives, as we talked about, tend to fall in order.

Isn't that a shock? But if we get it backwards, the most important things in our lives really do tend to suffer. And maybe you've recognized that in your own life.

Last week, we discovered that the people that we surround ourselves with in our lives, those relationships really do and will have far-reaching effects.

Sometimes it's important for us to focus on having better relationships to truly experience what God has in store for us. Today, we're continuing in this series, and we're diving into the next thing that we want to look at, and that's the need to make better choices.

Now, before you go poking the person sitting next to you, or starting to think about other people who certainly need... Oh, I'm glad you're here this morning, because you truly need to hear this message.

[2 : 16] Yeah, yeah, settle down. So I want you to recognize that we all struggle with this from time to time. We're striving to make the best choices in our lives, I believe, and we're trying to do the right things.

Is that true for you? I hope so. But this conversation truly is really important to me, because I think when we make bad choices, we tend to open ourselves up to toxic things in our lives that can really harm us from the inside out.

I have to confess, and you can't tell from the current state of my health, but I have to confess that sometimes I like fast food. And it's not always that fast.

Someone said, I do too. Preach. Preach it. So I try to choose, often, less bad things off the menu. Can you relate to that? Maybe you can.

But really, overall, that's not necessarily a good food choice for me in the first place. Right? I'm already in the door, and that's comedian Jim Gaffigan is a comedian I really enjoy.

[3 : 24] And he jokes about going to McDonald's, and people are very adamant against McDonald's and say, Oh, McDonald's. I would never eat at McDonald's. Well, he said their service numbers indicate that most people actually are lying.

They actually do go there. So, but that can be said for many, I believe, potentially toxic things in our lives. That without proper wisdom, all of us potentially run the risk of allowing toxic things into our hearts, into our minds, into our bodies.

And when I say toxic, I'm not talking about nuclear waste necessarily, but what I mean is any choice that leads to potentially poisonous outcomes that can harm us, cause sickness, or even death.

And much like the things that we consume daily, I would say that some of the other choices we make are actually poisoning our lives in other ways, physically or even spiritually.

And it's often the choices that we deem to be unimportant or inconsequential, maybe respectable sins, remember that series? Things, those things tend to be potentially the most harmful because they tend to be made impulsively.

[4 : 44] They tend to be made or condoned for ourselves or others unwisely. Better choices. Better choices really begin with a fear of God.

A desire to make better choices in our lives, in the present or the future, it more than likely begins with recognizing that we've made bad choices in the past.

Is that fair? New Year's resolutions are generally made because people recognize, ooh, I didn't get even 10 steps a day, let alone 10,000.

I'm going to do better next year. So maybe you've heard of that concept before. Maybe you've heard of this concept before, but I checked to make sure I had the original quote because if you Google it, there are lots of different versions.

So the definition of insanity, you already have a definition in your mind of what I'm going to say. You might be surprised that it's not right. The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over, that part is generally the same, and getting the same result, but expecting a different one.

[5 : 51] See, that's a little bit different definition of that expression. The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over, and getting the same result, but expecting a different one.

Can you relate to that? Are there areas in your life where you find yourself stuck in ruts of thinking or behavior that you can't seem to break out of?

Here's some laughs. Because to achieve different outcomes in our lives, we must make some intentional changes, or we'll keep getting the same results.

Does that make sense? I am bad at math, as I've told you many times over the years. Better than some people in my house, though. But I am bad at math, but to me, that's a simple equation, right? Unless we make intentional changes, we're going to keep getting the same results. Just as a hiker might use filters or tablets to purify water and make it safe to drink, we must have some sort of filter in our lives to protect ourselves from poor choices and even toxic decisions as well.

[7 : 02] The book of Proverbs. Are you shocked? The book of Proverbs offers us the best way to live in wisdom in the very first chapter.

Proverbs 1, verse 7 says, The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge. Your translation maybe say of wisdom. But fools despise wisdom and instruction.

I think we hear that in the world a lot, right? Don't tell me what to do. I have my worldview. I have my beliefs. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Perhaps you recognize someone was challenged to be humble, to be kind, to be considerate of others this week in a very public forum.

And that person reacted with anger. How dare you tell me to be humble? How dare you tell me to be Christ-like? So the author of Proverbs tells us that the beginning of wisdom is having a fear of God.

And we've considered this concept in the past, and some of us, I think, may struggle with it. So let's unpack it a little bit again. Doesn't that idea of fearing God sometimes maybe go against the biblical teaching that we are loved by God?

[8 : 20] Do you find that struggle a little bit? We talked about that in the past. Why should we or why would we fear him if he loves us? If God is love, why should I be afraid of him?

How does that help us to make better choices, being so afraid that I'm paralyzed in my decision-making? Well, this sense of fear, and I talked about it a bit at the beginning, this sense of fear can best be understood as reverence or respect.

But you can't stop there. Because I think lots of people will say the fear of the Lord is respect and reverence, and that's it. Well, there's more to it than that.

When we begin with a deep reverence and respect for God, we also need to recognize his position before us as the all-powerful creator of all things.

And our position, even more importantly, before him as fallible human beings. And by doing that, I believe we can begin to live with wisdom in our everyday choices.

[9 : 23] Does that make sense? The evangelist Ray Comfort, this would be a comforting quote, he once said it like this, when men don't fear God, insert people with men, when people don't fear God, they give themselves to evil.

Is that fair, do you think? How do you react to that? Because I believe that when we're given a list of potentially toxic choices, poor decisions to make, something that may seem like a good decision at the moment, I think we sometimes need, desperately often, some kind of reason to turn and run. Have you ever been there? Something is tempting you, something you know is maybe not the best decision, it's just right there. It's easy to grab, it's easy to take, and if we don't have a reason to turn from it, as Comfort is saying, if we don't have a reason to turn from it, or choose something better or different, we'll often choose the path of least resistance.

And so what should be a filter for us is that fear and reverence and respect for God. Have you ever, sin tends to thrive in the dark, right, literally and figuratively.

Have you ever thought of the fact as you're engaging in something that maybe you shouldn't, and I'm giving you a broad brush to apply that to whatever in your life you're thinking might be a bad choice, God is with you.

[10:54] Gulp. It's not a shock to him, right? It's not a shock or a surprise that you're doing what you're doing. He knows, He sees. So somehow the thought gets into our minds as human beings that, well, no one else is going to know because I'm doing this without anyone knowing.

I'm doing it off the radar. God is always there. Let that be a reminder to us, right? Other people may not be, but your holy God is right with you.

So it might be helpful to think about what it was like to be a child in the kitchen when your parents were cooking. So get that picture in your mind. Whenever you got too close to the stove, there may have been a loud warning.

Whoa, back up, back up. That's hot. Or even a move to pull your hand away or they stepped in between you and the stove. And so that was to protect.

But in some ways, it was also likely to instill a respect of risk. Your parent was saying to you, there is danger there. You need to be careful.

[12:00] You need to watch out. So this was not because your parents were upset with you. Did you ever get whacked for touching the stove? I hope probably not. Not because you were in danger from them, but they wanted to scare you into recognizing a need for, they were intervening.

A need to protect you from being harmed in some way. And this is true when we're living, the same thing is true when we're living with a fear of God in our lives.

Because knowing that God looks out for our best interests, he wants the best for us, and remember, put the filter in, not our best for us that we're asking God to give, but his best, his plans for our lives. If we're thinking about God being, looking out for our best interests, we don't want to make, we shouldn't want to make, decisions that will upset him or break his heart.

Do you see that? We don't want to make decisions that would lead to negative outcomes that might harm us or harm someone else. And we receive God's discipline in our lives, then we learn to move from fear to trust, as I said a moment ago.

[13:17] Because we know he loves us. We don't stop at fear, we move to trust out of love. But it all needs to begin with that fear of God.

Does that make sense? Even a trace can be harmful. I believe sometimes our minds and hearts can try to fool us into believing that just a little bit of a bad choice won't make much of a difference. Right? I'm saved. It's all good. God will forgive me. I will return to that bad choice over and over again.

But we can dip our toe in, we can have a taste of something, and we think it won't affect us. It won't cause any problems in the grand scheme of things. And isn't that what free will should allow us?

That's pretty selfish, right? It's a pretty self-interested perspective. I can have God and my salvation and my relationship with him, and I can do whatever the heck I want.

[14:25] But the problem with that thinking is that even a trace of a toxin can be incredibly harmful to us from the inside out. The book of James speaks to this fact in chapter 2.

James 2, verse 10. So you can go ahead and look that up. James 2, verse 10. The author is addressing the listener's interest in only focusing on certain parts of the law while disregarding other parts.

As if they were applying different levels of severity to each sin. Making some a big problem. Ooh, that's big. I gotta watch that one.

But others, not that big a deal. Does that seem like God's intention? James 2 says, For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.

So when we make a choice to break some of God's laws, even in a way that may seem small or insignificant to us, we're guilty, James says here, of breaking all of God's laws.

[15 : 39] Are you thinking, well, that doesn't seem fair. How do I get the whole guilt applied to me? Because ultimately, making bad choices in any area bring the same consequences.

Because bad choices in every area separate us from God. Does that make sense? To make better choices in the new year, we must commit to living, to seeking to live with wisdom in every area of our lives.

The problem is that we may often convince ourselves that we can dabble in sin and escape unscathed, as I touched on a moment ago.

Have you ever felt that way? My salvation is secure, so I can do that, and it won't really matter. But the truth is that sin always takes us farther than we want it to go.

It always makes us stay longer than we plan to stay. And it always costs us more than we ever thought we would have to pay.

[16 : 51] Can you relate to that in your own experiences? Because we must commit to better choices in both the small and big areas of our lives.

A little choice to visit that website may not be that big a deal, but it adds up. A little choice to under-report or omit something on your taxes may not seem like that big a deal, but it adds up. Or maybe in this case, it doesn't add up. A choice to gossip just a little about another person may not seem like a big deal, but it adds up.

It affects our character, it affects our relationships, our focus on God. All these little choices easily build up. And they keep us, they block us from the better life that God wants for us.

We can't make excuses, my friends, for a little poison, a little toxic experience in our lives. We can't justify even a little sin.

[18 : 03] Sin and Satan's goal is always, as Scripture tells us, to steal and kill and destroy. Sin and Satan seek to separate, to distract, to corrupt the good gifts that God has given us.

Sin, even the ones that we think may be insignificant, are not something to mess with or dabble in, thinking that they're harmless. When it comes to making better choices in our lives, there are often some gray areas that we have to navigate.

We may not all agree on what needs to be avoided, what may be permitted. I think I've told this story before. I remember, I was probably seven or eight, a friend of mine was having a birthday party going to a movie.

and they were going to see King Kong versus Godzilla. And I'm thinking, not a big deal. Not a great movie. It'll be fine. And my parents, I remember my parents thinking, hmm, the first movie my parents saw, and many of you can relate, the first movie my parents saw was on a date together as young adults and it was Sound of Music in a theater.

And it was a comfort zone move for both of them. That was the culture at the time and certainly the Christian culture at the time. So me, seeing a certain kind of movie would be okay for me but I'm not going to tell, I'm not going to recommend it to someone else even if it's Gladiator or whatever.

[19 : 43] Because I know, if I know another person and I know where their sensitivities lie, I don't want to be, we hear this in scripture, a stumbling block to someone else. Similarly, someone else may listen to Hank Snow and that makes me feel definitely uncomfortable because I don't like country music, by the way.

But do you see what I'm saying though? You could listen to a certain kind of music and not feel like it's a challenge for you. You could see a certain kind of movie or read a kind of book or whatever and it may not be a problem for you but it's still something important to watch because we have a finite amount of time on this earth and so there's a difference between downtime and distraction, right?

And it's always important, myself included, to keep those things in mind. Could versus should. Here it comes. So I believe there's a simple question that we can ask ourselves, we should ask ourselves, the next time we're posed with a choice.

Just because I should, could, sorry, doesn't mean that I should. Can you relate to that? Have you experienced that in your own life?

Just because I could do this, does it mean that I should? As human beings, God has given us each an incredible gift of free choice, unless you're a Calvinist.

[21 : 12] We'll get into that another time. But a double-edged sword of free choice because this gift of free choice, free will, can be a danger to us.

We've been given a portion of authority to make decisions for our lives. Things that have the potential to not only affect us, but other people as well.

We can choose what to wear each day. We can choose, as I said a moment ago, what movies we'll watch, how we'll speak to people. We have choices to make in our lives that are given to us to make.

Having just come through the Christmas season, one filled with overabundance of sweets and great food, how many of us ate too much?

There's hands going up. Awesome. No judgment. Over here. In our house, we get lots, get candy and treats and whatever.

[22 : 11] I am still small portions to myself and I have people in my house who blew through all theirs going, oh, and I'm going to say, dad, why do you still have this left?

And I'm thinking, because I don't want to be 600 pounds and it's a little treat every day, right? It's a little indulgence. But overeating and other kinds of indulgence may not seem like a big deal in the moment, right?

Oh, I'm celebrating. Oh, it's Christmas time. Calories don't count. All that stuff. They may not even matter in the grand scheme of things. But maybe we can also all hear ourselves justifying at some point.

Justifying something that in our words or in our minds wasn't that serious. But just because we could doesn't mean we should.

Even in harmless situations like that, it's a good question to ask yourself. And how often do we make honestly selfish or self-serving or overindulgent choices in our lives and then wind up regretting them in the end?

[23 : 24] Have you ever just gone, I don't mean food or whatever. Have you ever just made choice after choice after choice, even if it was neutral, and then afterwards gone, ah, maybe I shouldn't have done that.

But we must realize and recognize in our lives that to make better choices we need to admit it's on the slide, just because we can do something doesn't mean we should do it.

Paul writes about this in the book of 1 Corinthians. 1 Corinthians 6, 12. Paul says in that passage, I have the right to do anything, you say, but not everything is beneficial.

I have the right to do anything, but I will not be mastered by anything. So for context there, if you know the passage well, you might be thinking, oh no, I hope he's not going where I think he is.

So for context, Paul is specifically addressing some poor decisions that the early church was making in terms of specifically their sexuality. So they were trying to make a case as to why it didn't really matter what they did with their bodies because they were going to get new ones at the resurrection anyway.

[24 : 39] Have you heard that kind of Christian line of thinking? I'm going to get a new body anyway, so I'm going to town. Or, God will renew the earth, so what does it really matter that we're good stewards of it for now?

He's coming back. Let's drill baby drill. But Paul is saying that that is faulty logic. That just because our bodies can engage in sexual acts or any other kind of act or decision doesn't mean that we should, he's saying there.

Paul's making the case that although we may feel like we're most free when we can do whatever we want, kids are like that, right? If you give me a rule, I want to break it because you can't tell me what to do.

But we still have that tendency as adults, don't we? Don't tell me what to do. But we're actually mastered by sin when we don't have a fear of God, when we don't take the time to consider could versus should.

Because our choices matter, even the little ones, they all matter. Just for good measure, I'm going to say it again because you'll remember it. Just because you can doesn't mean you should, can't, or anyone else.

[25 : 56] So someone could choose to drive 150 kilometers an hour on White Mud. Some people do. Should they? Someone could spend all their spare time outside of work on Facebook or Instagram or X or whatever and ultimately reconnect with an old partner or an old flame and

rekindle a relationship.

Should they? Someone could choose to abuse drugs or alcohol. You could choose to overindulge in other ways like a double Big Mac.

Curse you, Connor McDavid, for promoting the double Big Mac. But should they, right? Should they do that? We all have choices that we face every day.

So I'm going to give you some food for thought. What choices have you made in the past year that given a second chance, given another opportunity, you would change them?

Ask God to help you learn from that. What choices do you know lie ahead of you right now? In the short term, medium term, or even long term, that you need God's wisdom to navigate.

[27 : 15] Ask Him. Because through prayer we can better position ourselves to make better choices by asking God to guide and direct us. You've heard me say many times in the past, how often do we make a choice or plan to make a choice and then as an afterthought ask God to endorse it?

sound familiar? Oh yeah, I'm going to do, oh Lord, yeah, by the way, this is what I'm going to do. Not what do you think, how should I approach this, but if you just want to gold stamp this for me, let's get on with life.

if we're not truly open to seeking and obeying God's lead in our decisions, where does that leave us? God is always available to help.

He's always there to guide us in making wise choices. But we also have each other. That's the great part about being followers of Christ in community like this.

Because for every decision or temptation we face, I can almost guarantee you, the odds are very good, that someone we trust in our lives, in this community, in our families, and so on, has gone through what we are going through or about to go through.

[28 : 39] They can help us to avoid making bad choices and make wiser ones. So hopefully after last week, you've been thinking about cultivating better relationships in your life as a result of that message.

So lean into those relationships. We talked about also if you don't have them, be seeking them, be praying about them. But leaning into good relationships, trusting relationships that are equally yoked with the Lord as we plan ahead.

Those are helpful things. Talk through your priorities together, your goals, your dreams, your desires, with the filter of seeking God.

Because the Bible tells us in Proverbs as well that there is safety in the multitude of counselors. Isn't that great? Safety in the multitude of counselors.

Do you feel like you're a burden on someone else when you ask them for their perspective or their help? That is prideful. Let it go. You are not helpless because you seek wise advice and help.

[29 : 50] You are making good choices. Can you see that? The world tells us we are helpless if we can't do for ourselves.

Hagwash. That is not God's message for you. There's no better time than the beginning of the year to seek better counsel. to seek to make better choices.

Amen.