

The Discipline of Choices

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[0 : 00] What kind of decision maker are you? Do you go with your heart? Are you a thinker and go with your head?

Or are you controlled by a strong willpower? The way decisions are made are influenced by all three, the head, the heart and the will. For me, it depends on the time of day.

First thing in the morning is when I make the best decisions. My willpower is always strongest when the sun is going up. I might have made the decision to eat healthy and try and be a fit type person. And so in the morning, it'll be a protein shake. And I'll make sure I get to the gym. But by the end of the day, I'll start making poor decisions.

You know, the end of the day, 3 o'clock in the afternoon, when my heart desires chocolate and sugar, and so my mind justifies what I want. It says things like, you've been good all day.

[1 : 07] You've worked hard. You deserve that pile of donuts. You agree, right? I do. Fine. Which of these three influences the decisions that you make?

The head, the heart or the will? Our head, our mind is the logical decision maker. Its electrical synapses allow thoughts at our senses to coordinate who we are.

Our hearts are our emotion and passion center behind what we do and who we are. It's the basis of the actions that we choose and our will. Well, we speak of willpower, the amount of strength to make a decision to, that is important to who we are at any given moment.

Choices about food and exercise, these might not seem that important, but the choices that we make impact our relationships with the people around us.

I can make good choices to care for my marriage, and for my friends, and for my kids. I can make choices that are made of sin and hurt me and hurt others.

[2 : 20] I can choose impatience and anger over love and gentleness. And it's the same with our relationship with God. Our choices impact our relationship with Him.

Are we aware of the things that are influencing our decisions? Do we know why we choose what we choose? We are in the middle of our series on the disciplines of grace.

And God, in His love and mercy, has shown us His grace. He has brought us into His family. And we pursue holiness in His power. And over the last couple of weeks, we've seen that pursuing holiness can only be done because of God's unearned and undeserved grace.

And last week, with John, we saw that without depending on God's strength, it's like trying to row a boat with one oar. We just end up going around in circles.

And today, we come to a bit of a pointy end. How do we make good choices in life? How do we actually make worthwhile God-honoring decisions?

[3 : 29] Choosing the right things so that we are moving towards God in obedience instead of moving away from Him? What would we look like if our choices were disciplined by God's grace?

So as we have a look at what God has to say to us today, let me pray for us before we jump into Ephesians. Heavenly Father, I thank You that You have given us Your Word and that You offer us salvation and love.

Father, help us to understand who we are as people and why we make certain choices so that we can make choices to obey You because You have loved us, Lord.

Amen. In the book of Ephesians, from the author Paul, he tells us what making good choices looks like. So please have your Bibles open with me at Ephesians 4.

We're going to start in verse 25. Share with those in need.

[4 : 56] Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God with whom you are sealed for the day of redemption.

Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. So in the first half of the book of Ephesians, the first three chapters, Paul spends his time outlining all that God has done in His grace in salvation for us.

And now Paul speaks about how a Christian is to live. What it looks like to live in the world as a Christian. And Paul is saying that the Christian life involves a long series of choices.

You can make this choice or this choice. You can... I think there's a slide for it. Let me see. Here we go. You can choose truth or you can lie. You can deal with your anger or you can let it smolder and burn.

[6 : 09] You can work or you can steal. You can share or you can spend it on yourself. You can speak helpful words. You can speak damaging words. You can be kind or full of rage. You can be compassionate or full of malice.

Because God in His love and grace has chosen to love us and make us right before Him. So now we get the choice to obey Him.

That is an every step, every decision, every moment of the day type thing. Speech that builds up. Sexuality that honors God.

Hands that work to God's glory. And Paul says in the book of Romans that we choose to obey God. When we choose to obey God, it leads to holiness.

When we choose to obey God, it leads to holiness. We put on Christ-like behavior, Christ-like character, one choice at a time.

[7 : 11] One choice at a time in each and every situation we are faced with throughout the day. You all had to make a choice this afternoon. Am I going to go to church?

Am I going to stay home and have that pile of donuts James has suggested already? We don't become more holy just by depending upon God.

We don't become more holy and Christ-like through praying a prayer of commitment to commit our lives to God. We don't even become holy just by reading God's Word.

Paul in Romans 6 encourages us that we become holy by choosing to obey God. We become like Christ when we make that choice to obey Jesus.

By obedience to His Word. By choosing to obey God's will that He has outlined in the Scriptures. Even Jesus Himself, who was perfect, had to put on holiness.

[8 : 14] He had to choose God's way. Hebrews 5 tells us that He had to learn holiness through obedience. And you see this when Jesus is tempted both by Satan and in the Garden of Gethsemane.

There is that moment where there's that moment before Satan when Satan's like, come on, choose this way. Turn this stone into bread or a pile of donuts.

You know, Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane faced with that choice, am I going to obey God to my death or am I going to choose my life? He chooses to obey God.

And He does that fully by obeying when He dies on the cross. Paul has given us this big list of choices to make. It seems pretty straightforward when you put it in black and white like that.

Holiness comes from choosing obedience. Obedience. But the reality is obeying God, making good choices is hard.

[9 : 21] Good choices are hard. It's not just as simple as making a decision, I'm going to obey God and then it's exactly what you do forever. At least that's my experience.

I wonder if that's yours. There is a very real struggle that goes on in each of us. A struggle to be a good person.

A struggle to obey God. A struggle to not be someone who sins. Good choices are hard. Fighting against sin and obeying God is a real struggle.

I see it in me. I see it in my sin. I see it in my kids. I see it in all of you. I've had plenty of conversations with people here at previous churches about people who are just struggling with their sin, who hate it.

They want to see their sin dead, but they struggle with the desire and pull. So for us today, we're going to have a look at two reasons why obeying God is hard and then three reasons, three ways that God helps us.

[10 : 31] Two ways that making good choices is hard and three ways that God helps us. So the first reason making good choices is hard is our hearts.

Paul in Romans 7 goes into this internal struggle. He says, For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out.

For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want to do. This I keep on doing. This is Paul. He was the best of the best Pharisees of the time.

He knew the Old Testament back to front. He wrote, and then he was converted by Jesus when he met Jesus. And he goes on to plant churches all across the region of Turkey and Asia at the time. And then he ends up writing half the New Testament, which we have. And he's saying that he struggled to do good, but he did evil instead.

[11 : 31] Thomas Cranmer, he was the head, the archbishop of the church in England about 500 odd years ago. And he thought a lot about this difficulty to obey God. And one person summarized his thoughts and said, What the heart loves, the will chooses, and the mind justifies.

The first reason making good choices is hard is because of our hearts. There is this trifold battle between heart and will and mind and the heart is the one that wins.

What we desire in our hearts is always going to win out. And our mind is just going to justify it. We say things like, I know I shouldn't do this.

I know I shouldn't eat this food. I know I shouldn't speak. I know I shouldn't. And then there's always a but. But I want to. I know I shouldn't, but I'm going to make an exception.

For me, I know I should be patient with my kids, but I am so frustrated with them. Maybe it's, I know I shouldn't say this to her behind her back.

[12 : 49] I should say this about her behind her back. But I get to share this gossip. I know I should declare this on my tax return, but what the tax office doesn't know.

I know I shouldn't look at this inappropriate material on my phone. I know it's not good for me, but I want to. When our willpower is weak, our hearts desires are revealed.

We can usually pretend that we're pretty good people, but sometimes things come along and knock down that and reveal who we really are. It's been interesting talking to people about this year's tax returns.

I don't know if you're a person who pays tax, has a tax return. It reminded me of what happened years ago when the government first started handing out this thing called the baby bonus. Did anybody get the baby bonus?

Are any of you children a baby of the baby bonus? That might be a more accurate. John is. John's a baby of the baby bonus. That's good. It was a financial boost that the government gave to people who had kids to pay for the associated costs of having a child.

[13 : 59] You know, nappies and all those wonderful things. But I had so many conversations with people about what they were actually spending their money on. Holidays, TVs, things for them and not what it was actually intended to.

A big chunk of cash revealed where their hearts were at. I wonder what would you do if I gave you a sizable chunk of cash right now?

Would it reveal where your heart is? Would it reveal how you were treasuring Jesus? There are times when our choices reveal the state of our hearts.

If we were to just think that we as humans and people made decisions in our minds that weren't influenced by our hidden desires and motives in our heart, we would understand how we work and how other people work.

We are far more complicated than that. And what is going in our hearts when it comes to what's really important is what wins. Even when our mind says something else.

[15 : 08] Because what the heart wants, what the heart desires, our will chooses, and the mind is just going to justify it. So that's the first reason that making good choices is hard, because of our hearts.

The second reason making good choices is hard is because we get decision fatigue. Have you heard of decision fatigue? Have you felt decision fatigue? Paul is nodding with me.

I remember when we were planning our wedding, not Paul and I, I'll listen to my wedding, when we were planning our wedding, there were just so many decisions that needed to be made. There was the wedding cake.

What flavor was going to be of the cake? How many layers were going to be in the cake? What was going to be on the cake? What kind of knife were we going to use to cut the cake? Which we broke when we were cutting our cake?

How many people are we going to invite? Where are they going to sit? In what order are they going to sit? There is the wedding dress. Maybe not that dress, maybe that dress, let's try another 15 wedding dresses.

[16:09] Now, the bridesmaids dresses, I don't like that, I don't like you in that, and the man wears a suit. My wife helpfully pointed out to me that I didn't have to make all those decisions, it was mainly her making those decisions, but I was involved with enough of them.

Making decisions is exhausting. And we have to make choices all day long. What am I going to wear? What am I going to eat?

How am I going to get to work? Am I going to buy a coffee before work, or do I have a coffee at work? What flavour is it going to be? What am I going to do? Am I going to go to that tutorial today, or will I just do it at home?

Will I get sushi or dumplings for lunch? And it leaves our brains exhausted, unable to make good decisions. This is why people like Steve Jobs, the founder and head of Apple until he passed away. He wore the same thing every day so he just didn't have to make that decision. So he could use his brain for other things. And how do we go then when it comes to making choices to obey God?

[17:25] Making good choices to obey God is influenced by how fatigued we get. As I mentioned earlier, I'm a morning person, so I make better choices in the mornings.

Making the God honoring choice to be patient is much harder when I'm tired at the end of the day. Making the choice to be gentle and loving with my words at the end of the day for me is a lot harder. Recently I read a study about the impact decision making has on our willpower. In a research study by the National Academy of Sciences from the US, they examined the factors that impacted judges when they were making decisions whether criminals should go out on parole.

They looked at all the factors and the biggest factor was not the type of crime, the severity of the crime, how long they've been incarcerated. The biggest factor that impacted whether a criminal got parole was the time of day.

It was the time of day. So first thing in the morning the percentage of decisions made by a judge was 65%. So 65% of their decisions of criminals they went out on parole.

[18:45] As the day went on that plummeted to zero. And so by and then the judge would have a lunch break, have some food, the brain would have some sugar in it so it could function properly, and they'd come back and their percentage of criminals out on parole would go back up to 65.

Very generous. It would drop again after that. Our willpower is like a muscle that gets fatigued. And so if you're going to go and commit a crime anytime soon, you want to see that judge early in the morning, not at 11.30 when he's hangry.

Every time we make a decision, it gets harder to make the next one a good one. We get home from work or from school and we want to make good decisions. We want to love and honour our parents as we honour God, but we've run out of willpower.

We want to eat a healthy meal, we want to cook good food, but we've run out of willpower and so we order Uber Eats instead. You know, you want to go out and exercise, you want to make good decisions, but it's cold and the TV is not going to watch itself.

Why is this important? Why is this important for us as Christians? Well, we need to understand who we are as people with bodies.

[20:11] God has made us embodied creatures. We are not just spirits. We have a spiritual aspect, but we also have bodies who are reliant on food.

We use energy that is not unlimited. do you know when you are tempted to sin? Do you know what is going to have a negative impact on you?

Do you know the time of day that you are more likely to struggle? So when we are confronted by sin, maybe we need to be like the judge and go and eat some food so that our brains have some sugar and it functions so we can make good choices?

Do you know what you are like as a person with a body following God? This all seems stacked against us. Our hearts are going to do whatever they want to do.

Making decisions is exhausting for us, but good choices are possible. And there are three things, three ways to help us with making good choices.

[21:25] The first, let's have a look at that quote again. What the heart loves, the will chooses and the mind justifies. We don't need more willpower.

Willpower is not going to help us. We don't need a more disciplined mind. We definitely don't need more guilt when we sin. What we need is the first one.

We need a new heart. And this is what God promised in Ezekiel 11, that he would give us a new heart and a new spirit. And this is what happens when God reveals himself to us.

And we can see Jesus for who he is. He is God's son. No longer are we slaves to sin. God has rescued us and he has given us a way to choose to obey him.

And as we grow in Christ likeness and follow him, he is changing our hearts. He has taken out our heart of stone and put in a heart of flesh and he is changing our desires so that we can be more Christ-like, so that we can make decisions to honor him.

[22 : 35] He is changing us from just pursuing wealth and greed and power and immorality to choosing to love and be generous and gentle, to love and honor God.

God offers a gracious gift of a new heart so that we can choose him, so we can obey him. When I've gotten really frustrated at bad choices, I'll usually respond, James, don't do that again, don't be an idiot, you're better than that, God loves you, you need to be stronger, you need to have more willpower and that is not always helpful.

It is far better to remember and pray, God, change my heart, change my desires, give me new desires so that I am not seeking to please myself, but so that I want to honor you and love you.

And so the first thing that helps us to obey God is that he offers and gives us a new heart, a new heart with new desires. Secondly, God has made us creatures of habit.

You might even be sitting in the same seat thereabouts that you usually sit in, I don't know, I wonder if I could take a couple of paragraphs over the next couple of weeks and check that out if you like, but we are creatures of habit and this is one of the ways that God has given us to get over decision fatigue.

[24 : 09] If we make a decision enough times, it will become a habit so we don't have to make that decision. We'll just do it without thinking about it.

And at the heart of habits is the brilliance of our Creator God. Because making decisions takes time and energy, but habits keep us from having to make that decision over and over and over again.

We are really good at making habits because our brain is very lazy. Our brain doesn't want to use energy, it wants to conserve energy. It wants to take something that we do regularly and just make it a habit.

It will turn almost any routine into a habit. This is why when I've hurt my right hand and have to brush my teeth with my left hand, it just doesn't know what to do. And I have a certain habit with my right So our brain is really good at making habits.

And when we are trained to have good habits, our brain is then freed up to use that energy to make good choices to obey God.

[25 : 17] It's not going to get as fatigued as easily. It's freed up to use that energy to make good God-honoring choices. Imagine if we put some hard work and some energy into taking off some bad habits and putting on good ones.

Imagine if we put on the habit of getting up first thing in the morning spending time with God, hearing from God's voice before anybody else's voice.

Spending time in prayer. Imagine if we put on the habit of community group and gathering together to treasure Jesus and so that's just an automatic part of the week. Don't even have to think about it.

I just go to church, I go to community group, they're just my habits. Because it's dangerous to have to make these decisions over and over again. Our hearts easily wander, we don't want to obey God and so if we make these habits it's going to protect us.

I heard about a Christian recently who wasn't very encouraging. He put in his calendar to encourage someone every three days.

[26 : 29] I think if I was going to do that it would have to be every couple of hours but that's just me. But he made a habit out of it and so through that habit he has now become someone who habitually encourages and builds up other people with his words.

That habit helped him to choose to become more Christ-like but it also took some effort. If Jesus truly is our Lord and Saviour and our greatest treasure in our lives, do our habits reflect that?

It is worth it to make the effort and use our energy to cultivate a new habit, maybe even two new habits, to pursue God and being like him, to make him our greatest joy.

But I want to give a brief warning on habits. Habits can be very good but they don't make us holy on their own. Some of us are incredibly disciplined.

Some of us might be getting up really early, memorising large chunks of the Bible. Maybe we get out of bed and we spend exactly 16 minutes reading God's Word and then four and a half minutes praying every day.

[27 : 44] And it's easy to think that being disciplined and doing that kind of thing every day brings us closer to God. But it's not habits that bring us closer to God, it's choosing to obey him.

And so habits are a wonderful blessing for us because they free up our brains to have the energy to make good choices. So firstly, God gives us new hearts with new desires.

And secondly, God has made us people who can get over decision fatigue with good habits. And thirdly then, it's the importance of training.

In 1 Timothy 4, Paul tells us that physical training is of some value, which is a little bit of justification for me spending some time at the gym. But spiritual training is of utmost value.

We must train ourselves to be godly. Choosing godliness takes practice. We've seen that decision making is exhausting like exercising a muscle, but what happens when you exercise a muscle?

[28 : 56] Anybody? What happens when you exercise a muscle? Noeline, what was that? It builds. Hopefully, it might even get bigger and more defined.

I don't know. But more importantly, it becomes more able to withstand pressure and weight. God wants us to train ourselves to obey him so that we can understand more pressure and more weight. God's love for you. He has saved us through his son. He gives us a new heart with new desires and we can now make good choices. But this is where the rubber hits the road.

This is where things get real. Because we need to train ourselves to obey every single day. The temptation to sin comes. Imagine any of your sins.

Just take one of them. That temptation to sin comes and you're tired. And you've been praying to God about this sin every day for the last five years.

[30 : 01] And you hate this sin. You want to put it off. Are you willing to say no in that moment?

That's what it comes down to. Will we put off sin and put on choosing to obey God? Remember that list from Paul in Ephesians 4.

Every day we are training ourselves to be people characterized by either godliness or ungodliness by by lies or by truth by selfishness or unselfishness by anger or forgiveness by impurity or purity pride or humility.

Every day we are making us more like one of these. We are people. More used to are we people more used to lifting the weight of truth.

Able to deal with truth or are we training ourselves to lie? Are we training ourselves to let go of our pride and to put on humility or are we training ourselves to be angry?

[31 : 13] Jess Backich in the office recently made a decision that she as part of a mental health awareness campaign she was going to do something like it's it's 6,000 push-ups.

It's a ridiculous amount of push-ups over a month and she has to do something like 150 every day. She's going to have the biggest shoulders here even bigger than Darcy by the end of the month.

The reality is though she it's it's really easy to make that decision at the start of the month. But every day she's faced with a choice. Is she going to get down and do those push-ups?

Now you may have chosen to follow the Lord and every day we are faced with a choice. How am I going to obey him today?

Don't excuse sin in your life. Don't be too happy to say oh that's sin. That's just part of who I am. I'm a bit impatient. Particularly in the morning when I haven't had my coffee.

[32 : 16] I'm a bit fiery. I've just I've just got a hot temper. However bad habits come from a series of bad choices. We are all tempted to sin in many ways.

And God enables us to make a choice to obey. He offers salvation to all people to give a new heart so that we are not stuck making bad choices but he offers a new heart with new desires.

Have you taken God up on this offer? Are you frustrated with where your life is and where your life is going? Maybe you fall into bad habits and can't seem to make good ones.

God offers a new heart that is filled with new desires to love. Ask him to have godly desires today.

Brothers and sisters do you understand who you are as people?

Do you know what and when it is hard for you to obey? What do you need to change so that you can obey God? It is possible to make good choices and it is possible to obey God.

[33 : 30] Because God has given us a new heart. He gives us habits to draw us closer to him to help us choose to obey. But will we choose to?

Will you train yourself in the love of God to choose his will as long as it is today? Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you, Jane.