



Proverbs Planning and Decision Making

Summary: We must choose between two ways to live: either trusting God or leaning on our own understanding.

This morning, in our study of Proverbs, we're going to look at decision-making – one of the most important life skills you can develop because we are blessed *and burdened* with an endless array of choices today from the petty to the profound.

An explosion of technology and communication over the past 20 years has multiplied our options exponentially. Now instead of choosing between the local rock, country or hip-hop station I choose between Spotify, Apple Music, Pandora or a podcast. Instead of choosing to watch ABC, NBC, or CBS each night, I have to choose between YouTube, Hulu, Netflix, or Amazon Prime. And they offer, on demand, more content than I could ever consume in a lifetime.

Speaking of a lifetime, I also have to make choices that have little do with technology, but which shape my life. Which school should I attend, which major should I pursue, which job should I pursue, which man or woman should I pursue or should I let pursue me? Should we really get married, when should we have kids? How many? Should I go back to work? Is it time to head in a new direction with my career? What should I do about my aging parents? What should I do about my adult children? Who should I vote for? And, oh yeah, am I going to make my own lunch or buy something while I'm out tomorrow?

How do we navigate it all? Is there some trick to decision-making, some hack we can apply to reduce the stress associated with all these options? Yes. There is. And we find it in a book that is thousands of years old, written to people living in a completely different context.

Remember a father wrote Proverbs to give his son instruction for life, including what to value and what to avoid. In other words: how to make good choices. And though we have more options than any other people living at any other time in history, certain foundational truths about life and meaning have never changed. Proverbs addresses those core principles and gives us a useful framework for planning and decision-making that still applies directly to our modern lives.

Read with me in

Proverbs 3:1 My son, do not forget my law,
But let your heart keep my commands;
2 For length of days and long life
And peace they will add to you.

That's important to note – if you're looking for peace, here's how to find it:

3 Let not mercy and truth forsake you;
Bind them around your neck,
Write them on the tablet of your heart,
4 And so find favor and high esteem
In the sight of God and man.

Dad says, I'm telling you how to live in a way that honors God and gives you a good reputation in the sight of other men and women. And here's what it all comes down to:

5 Trust in the LORD with all your heart,
And lean not [don't depend or rely] on your own understanding;
6 In all your ways acknowledge [know Him, submit to] Him,
And He shall direct your paths [keep your paths straight].

Proverbs 3:5-6 is one of those key passages of the Bible. These are verses you hear again and again in your Christian life because the principle is so foundational: our lives should reflect faith and trust in God and His supremacy in all things. And that is true whether you live in the Middle East 3000 years ago, or whether you live in the suburbs of Washington DC today. The details of life may look different, but the foundational principle remains: trust God and His supremacy in all things.

If you're taking notes this morning, here are the points I want to make. First, there are two ways to live – you can either follow God or go your own way. Second, choosing to follow God is neither easy nor automatic. But, third, requires faith and trust in God as well humility and discipline for me. And then, I want to close by looking at some practical steps you can take to discover God's direction for your life.

So, first, we see there are two ways to live – you can [trust in the LORD with all your heart](#) and accept His direction for your path, or you can [lean on your own understanding](#). In other words, you can choose between what God commands and desires, or you can try to figure things out on your own. You can acknowledge God [in all your ways](#), or you can ignore Him.

It's a real struggle we face every day. And God isn't hiding it or ignoring it. Don't be shocked, or think you're special, when you have what seems like a new, different, or better idea about how to live – life has always been that way. Go all the way back to the Garden of Eden and you'll discover Adam and Eve had their own ideas too – their own understanding of what would happen if they ate from the tree.

Unfortunately, contrary to what we want to believe – all roads don't lead to the same destination, not all opinions, ideas, and philosophies are true.

Later in Proverbs we find it put this way:

Proverbs 14:12 There is a way that seems right to a man,
But its end is the way of death.

Now, I think we can all agree with that to some degree, we have all had the experience of thinking we were making a good choice, expecting it was going to go well, and then having things fall apart, break down, or blow up on us. We thought it was a good idea, but it turned out to be the wrong choice.

Often, what happens in those situations is that we were surprised by something we hadn't expected. There was a variable we didn't factor in and it affected the final outcome.

And, of course, God is the largest variable of all. If you leave Him out of your planning, it can have catastrophic affects on your predictions.

But, and here is our second point: choosing to acknowledge God and His direction for our life is neither easy nor automatic. Consider how much force, or perhaps we should say emphasis or persuasion there is in the call to trust, acknowledge and follow God. It's compelling speech. Why? Because this is not what we normally do.

Normally, we **lean on our own understanding**. Our default position is to operate independently, to make our decisions in a God-vacuum, *even if we know Him*.

When you read the Old Testament Scriptures you find Israel trusting in the walls they build around their cities for protection (Deu 28:52), or in political or military leaders they have chosen (Judges 9:26). You find Israel forming coalitions and putting their trust in political alliances with surrounding nations (2 Kings 18:21-22 and others) or trusting in their wealth (Ps 49:6; 52:7).

And these were people who knew God; who experienced prophets and miracles. Proverbs itself, as we have said so many times, is addressed to the son of King Solomon, the wisest man to ever live, a young man who grew up in Jerusalem, and saw the majestic Temple right next to the palace. And yet, *even he* is told:

**Trust in the LORD with all your heart,
Lean not on your own understanding**

Friends, it is important to note: there is a very real possibility, that even those of us who know God, and have experienced His work in our lives, can drift off-course over time as new challenges come our way.

The Apostle Paul put it this way to the church in Galatia:

Galatians 3:3 Are you so foolish? Having begun in the Spirit, are you now being

made perfect by the flesh?

You started off receiving the mercy and blessings of God that He freely gave, and are you now trying to do things on your own, leaning on your own understanding? God has blessed you before in the past, taken care of you, proven His love and mercy toward you, but now, now you're facing this, and this seems bigger, or more complex, it feels like there's more on the line, and you're looking around at other options, trying to figure things out instead of resting and trusting.

So, let's talk about that for a minute – let's bring some ugly stuff out of the shadows of our soul and into the spotlight and ask: what *are* the things you're prone to trust in?

We all have them. 'As long as this or that is there, I'm fine.' Or, "As long as he or she or they are involved, I'm fine.' 'As long as this or that happens, I'm fine.' But how many of us say, '*I'm trusting in the LORD with all my heart, so I know it's going to be fine?*'

And why don't more of us answer that way, or answer that way about more things?

In a word: control. We want to have control. We want guaranteed outcomes. It's hard to trust in the LORD because He *might* not give me what I want. Or, there might be a better way or a faster way or an easier way for me to get what I want than waiting patiently on God.

And, sometimes we have unrealistic expectations. We expect things to work out perfectly and to always go well. We might not say it or think it this clearly, but most of us, even in the church, have an expectation that life should be pretty easy, free of disasters and tragedies if you do it right.

But friends, God says we live on a broken planet surrounded by sinful people. And sometimes we're going to experience the affects of that. Read Scripture, study history, and you will find plenty of people, wonderful, holy, dedicated and mature saints of God who suffered terrible tragedies in their lives, but still trusted God. Don't start leaning on your own understanding just because life isn't perfect. God never said it would be, that's why He's asking you to trust Him. If life was perfect, easy, and instantly fulfilling, it wouldn't require trust – you would live surrounded by the proof and evidence.

Brothers and Sisters, we require a near constant spiritual recalibration of our souls lest we too wander off, led by our own understanding, seeking outcomes we think we can control or influence or understand instead of acknowledging Him in all our ways and allowing Him to keep directing our paths.

Can I give you one quick, concrete way to fight against this drift? Let me continue to encourage you to communicate with God first thing in the morning before you communicate with anyone else. Before you read email, check your texts, or open a single app on your phone, open your Bible or a devotional and spend a few minutes

acknowledging God so that He can direct your path before everything and everyone else tries to get their word in. And in the evening, put all that stuff away at least 30 minutes before bedtime so you have a few minutes to relax and pray and maybe read some more Scripture or a devotional before bed. Let the last thing you do each day be to acknowledge God and His place in your life and to consider how that affects your place in this world.

Because there are two ways to live, and choosing to acknowledge God, accept His direction and trust Him is not always easy. This brings us to our third point: we're going to need to grow our faith and trust in God while humbling and disciplining ourselves.

We're told:

5 Trust in the LORD with all your heart,

But what does that mean? How do you do that? Well, it's not all emotional. The idea of the heart here includes your inner self, your mind, will, heart, and understanding. Faith and trust are interwoven here. Both your feelings and your logic are involved.

In fact, your mind helps you motivate your heart, and your heart helps you moderate your mind. So, I need to ask myself – do I really believe that God is God? Do I really believe that He is all knowing and therefore knows the best things for me to do in a given situation? Do I really believe that He is kind and loving and therefore desires good for me in a given situation? If so, I can trust Him.

And, most likely we do, in some areas. We trust God to get us into heaven when we die. But do we trust Him with the details of tomorrow and this coming week? Often our trust breaks down because instead of acknowledging Him in all our ways, with all our heart, we acknowledge Him in *some* of our ways, with *some* of our heart.

You see, most of us want to be co-manager with God. We'll take some areas and let Him have others. But that's not [all your heart](#), and that's not [all your ways](#).

My friends, we're talking about the God who knows the end from the beginning; the God who tells you how the earth and human history began and how it will end. This is the God who sits enthroned over all eternity, who has reigned forever and ever and will reign forever and ever more. This is the God who designed the way electrons orbit a nucleus, the way an acid reacts to a base, the God who flung Mars into its position and smiles as we humans try to reach it, the God who designed the hand that holds a smartphone, the God who has watched the nations and empires of Rome, and China, and India, and South America rise and fall and rise again.

And yet, instead of trusting Him, we are prone to [lean on our own understanding](#).

How often do we make understanding a prerequisite to obedience? But it's not. There are many, many, things in life that you don't have to understand in order to obey.

If you had to understand how a drug works, most of us could never take a prescription.

If you had to understand how your phone works, you could never use it.

If you had to understand how a plane flies you could never take it.

So, why do you think you have to understand God in order to trust Him? You will always be prone to want to lean on your own understanding, your own comprehension, instead of exercising faith and trust in God. So, at times, you will need to humble yourself, tell yourself no, and even though you don't fully understand how it's all going to work out, step out in faith and obey.

[6 In all your ways acknowledge Him,
And He shall direct your paths.](#)

Here we find a call to comprehensive, whole-life, Christian faith. There is no area of your life that is outside of God's influence or direction. Acknowledge Him [in all your ways](#). God is not simply the God of Sundays and holidays and bad news. He's the God of everyday. God of the workplace and schoolroom, God of the sports fields, God over the kitchen, the basement and the bedroom. God of the lecture hall and the lab.

We have a young woman in the congregation working on her PhD and in the process of doing research she was stuck, didn't know where to go next or what to do – it's groundbreaking research, things that have never been done or studied before, and so she's right there on the cutting edge of advancing humanity's understanding in her chosen field and she hits a wall.

So, being a Christian who believes this is all God's world and she's just trying to discover it, she acknowledged Him and asked Him to direct her path, and not long after, an idea came to mind that led to the next steps in the study. It was a major breakthrough that affected the examination and interpretation of the entire project. All because she acknowledged God and asked Him to direct her path.

Are you inviting God into all the areas of your life? Do you ask God for guidance and blessing at work? Do you seek Him as you think about scheduling the kid's activities? Do you ask God to show you where to live, or what opportunities to take? Do you acknowledge Him in *all* of your ways?

Let me give you some very practical thoughts and ideas of what that looks like.

First, you need to know that sometimes God's direction is very specific. We like this, we like to know exactly what God wants us to do, unless we disagree with it, but we usually like God's very specific, precise direction. Unfortunately, it doesn't always come that way. His direction is more frequently general. Another way of saying this is: sometimes God's

will is a dot, and other times it's a circle.

His general will, the broad circle stuff is found in His Word. The Bible never changes; it means the same thing to all people at all times in all cultures. When it says husbands, love your wives like Christ loves the church – expressions of love may vary from culture to culture and even from woman to woman – it doesn't mean all men at all times in all places should bring their wives chocolates and flowers, but the general concept remains in play – no matter where you are, no matter how love is expressed culturally, husbands have an obligation to love their wives. That's God's general will.

God's specific will can be sorted out as we persistently acknowledge Him in all our ways. The Bible tells you to love your wife, but it doesn't tell you exactly who to marry. It tells you to work hard, but it doesn't tell you where to work. It tells you to love your neighbor, but it doesn't tell you where to live. In those areas you're going to need to make specific application of general principles. So here are some ways we can do that as we seek to acknowledge God and ask for His direction.

First and foremost, you have to check your own motives – are you still leaning on your own understanding in some way? Are you trying to influence the outcome, or do you really, honestly, want whatever God says is best?

Proverbs 21:2 Every way of a man is right in his own eyes,
But the LORD weighs the hearts.

Second, reach out to the body of Christ. God has brought us into a family of believers – brothers and sisters who walk through life with us and he wants to use them to counsel and encourage us.

Last week we saw King Solomon tell his son

Proverbs 4:11 I [dad] have taught you in the way of wisdom;
I have led you in right paths

And later we read

Proverbs 20:18 Plans are established by counsel;
By wise counsel wage war.

Proverbs 15:22 Without counsel, plans go awry,
But in the multitude of counselors they are established.

Ask other Christians for their thoughts and guidance and prayerfully consider their input.

And third, look at circumstances:

Proverbs 16:9 A man's heart plans his way,
But the LORD directs his steps.

Is God opening or closing unexpected doors in front of you? If you lean on your own understanding, you are likely leaning on your own resources too. But maybe God has things you don't see and wants to use them to bring better outcomes for your situation. If you acknowledge Him and seek His direction, He may ask you to trust Him and lead you to do something you wouldn't have thought of or chosen on your own, because He's not going to leave you on your own - He's going to supply some surprises that change the final outcome.

If you were to trace the outline of my life, this is exactly what you would discover. There was a time when I left the Marine Corps to pursue my degree expecting to come back into the intelligence field as a commissioned officer. But instead, God called me into ministry. There was a time when I expected to be in ministry on the mission field, and later in the chaplaincy, but God called me to pastor a church. There was a time when I was committed to being single and not dating and God put an amazing young woman named Madeleine into my life. In each situation I had come up with what seemed like a pretty good plan. A plan that I thought would honor and serve God based on my own understanding. But God had things in store that I never would have foreseen. Things I never could have planned for. And knowing what I know now, I would never go back to my old ideas and trade in what He has given instead.

But sometimes, we don't want to trust God because we're afraid we'll be wrong. If that's what's holding you back, you need to know this: God judges motives more than outcomes. If you're wrong, if you make a mistake, God always has the divine ability to step in and keep you from falling off the edge. But more often than not we don't get in trouble by trusting God, we get in trouble by leaning on our own understanding and making compromises to "make things work."

Let me end with an encouragement that this is not easy. You are surrounded by people who do not do this - people who do not acknowledge God or seek His direction, people who do not trust in Him, people who lean on their own understanding and want you to lean on it too. You are going to stick out at times as you follow Christ. Trusting God is going to make you different. It will lead you to make different choices and have different priorities. It will lead you to do things differently than others. But God is worth it.

The Apostle Paul put it this way, writing to early Christians living in Rome:

Rom 12:1 I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, *which is* your reasonable service. 2 And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what *is* that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

The Christian life is meant to be a reaction. We direct our lives toward God because of all He has already done for us. We were wandering, lost, perhaps ignorant or perhaps intentionally rebellious, but we were living for ourselves, leaning on our own understanding, following a path that seemed good to us, but which ends in destruction. So, He interrupted our lives, our plan, brought us conviction, and offered us forgiveness in Christ and a new life– a new life meant to be lived with His guidance and direction and all the blessings – immediate and eternal that come from that.

Christians, we have been crucified with Christ, it is no longer we live, but Christ lives in us, and the life that we now live, we live by faith in the Son of God who loved us, and gave Himself for us. In light of all He has done for us, let us trust Him with all our hearts today.

Let's pray.