

How to Make Good Decisions by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



"Double Sill" by Donald Fox, [Donald Fox Fine Art](#) (from his Blog "Into the Mist of Mysticism")

Prayer of Illumination

Lord, we believe. Help our unbelief.
Amen.

Scripture: Philippians 1:9-11 (NRSV)

"And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God."

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – How to Make Good Decisions

Decisions. We're always having to make decisions. Some big, others small. Some decisions are just for ourselves. And then there are decisions made for others.

Sometimes the decision is a true or false question. Other times multiple choice. And of course, there are times you have no choice at all.

We're constantly confronted with having to make decisions:

*Which birthday card should I choose?
Should I get salt and vinegar chips or BBQ chips?
What news station do I trust? Can I trust any of them?
Should I take the job offer?
Can I afford this house or car I really like?
What medical treatment should I choose?
Should I date this person?
Should I go to college? What school should I attend?
What's the best career path for me?
When can I retire?
Is it time to hand over my car keys or go to a retirement home?
Should I lead or follow? Act or wait? Obey or resist?*

The list goes on...

There are many strategies out there for making decisions, and not all are the best:

- Crystal balls and eight balls.
- Palm readers and tarot cards.
- You can spin the wheel of fortune or play roulette.
- There's "Eeny Meeny Miny Moe"
- And the point and read method.
- Or just go with your gut or obey your thirst.
- And of course, the most popular approach: Google it!

The truth is, there are no formulas or easy steps, no magic wands or silver bullets for making foolproof decisions. It's an act of faith because we usually don't have all the information. As Paul says, *"we look through a dark glass."*

But God has given us some guidance on how to read the signs of daily life. This is called discernment. The word "discern" means "to put to the test." In ancient times, the word was often used for determining if a coin was real or counterfeit. God has given us many practical tools for the art of making good decisions. The primary ways God helps us are through:

- Prayer—not just talking prayer, but also listening prayer.
- And Scripture—being grounded in God's Word helps us discern God's will for our lives.

These are our most important gifts. Cherish them. Use them regularly.

But the challenge is that we often don't hear, or we mis-hear, or we just plain plug our ears to God's signs and signals. But God is speaking all around us—not only through prayer and Scripture, but also through books we read, encounters we have, through nature, our circumstances, and world events.

- God can also speak through science, through history.
- God can grab our attention or help us wrestle with the big questions through art or film or dance.
- God speaks in solitude through that still small voice.
- God can help our discernment through journaling.
- Or speaking to our conscience.

We just have to make sure that we distinguish between our voice and God's voice. They are not one in the same.

- God speaks through community, through the people on our path.
- God speaks through trusted colleagues and honest friends and even strangers.

Henri Nouwen calls them "living signposts." St. Augustine believed that the good, the beautiful, and the true are from God and it can be found in surprising places. God speaks through just about anybody and anything—we just have to be listening and open.

The more tools we have in a greater range of areas, the better. All of these things can help us make better decisions in life:

- To get us out of ourselves, to see things differently, to encounter us and grab ahold of us.
- To unsettle us, inspire us, broaden us, and ground us.
- They're landmarks along the way of our pilgrimage of faith that provide guidance when we've lost our sense of direction.
- They can help us get our bearings again.

Yet the art of discernment takes experience, practice, training, and time. It often comes through trial and error learning. Many times the lessons of failure are more invaluable than the lessons of success—if we're paying attention.

Our passage shows us God's agape love is regulated and shaped by two things:

- knowledge and full insight.

The love that Paul prays for over the Philippian church is an informed love and a growing love. A love that helps you make thoughtful decisions in the real world. Paul borrows the word "full insight" from the philosophers of his day. It's the only time the words are used in the New Testament. Other ways to translate "full insight" are:

- perception or moral understanding.

"Full insight" has the ability to make a good solid choice among a dizzying array of options. So spiritual discernment involves sifting—sifting through our impulses, personalities and peccadillos.

Discernment allows God to shed light on our motives and ingrained habits, our long-held assumptions about ourselves, God, our situation, our choices, and how things work in the world. The purpose of this shifting and shining process is to make us more and more loving—like Jesus.

*Growing in our love for God,
love for our neighbor,
and love of ourselves.*

In this process, we partner with the Holy Spirit, and clear out some the clutter and junk— making room for God to bring about growth, change, maturity—a new thing. You make better decisions when you know yourself—your strengths and weaknesses. Take time to notice and understand your emotions, feelings, and moods and how they drive you.

Ask yourself some probing questions:

*Is it well with my soul?
What's going on in my spirit?
Why am I feeling impatient, angry, offended, fearful,
or at peace, or joyful right now?
What 's my body telling me right now?*

Stay with your emotions—experience them and observe them. Seek understanding.

I've learned to PAY ATTENTION if my heart starts racing while reading an email. Something is going on. I stop. Step away. I don't reply. I wait 24 hours maybe 48 hours. I've noticed when I come back to the very same email in a better frame of mind—I feel like I'm reading a totally different email. The email didn't change—I changed. I can respond to what it really says, not to my emotions.

(Other times I take a while to get back, not because of my emotions, but because I'm behind on my emails!)

I like St. Ignatius' guidance:

Never make a big decision when you're in a state of desperation or the throws of despair—it won't be a good decision.

- *Sleep on it.*
- *Pray on it.*
- *Get more information.*
- *Talk to others.*
- *Then step out in faith.*

Paul says God's plans are for us to be "pure" and "blameless"—set apart for Christ.

These two words are fascinating. The Greek word "pure" was often used for something that was brought out into the light of the sun to be clearly seen and examined. Discernment is allowing the Son of God to shine his light upon our lives and our circumstances. It's a willingness to come out of

the darkness and into God's marvelous light. In this process, the impurities of double-mindedness and mixed-motives are exposed and extracted. We become more pure of heart—more transparent, genuine, and honest. By the grace of God, we live life with wholeness and holiness.

The word "blameless" is equally fascinating. It has two functions. It describes people who don't put stumbling blocks in other people's way to trip them up. It also describes people who are careful to avoid those same things themselves that would cause them to stumble. We make good decisions when we "do no harm" to others or to ourselves.

All of this can be intimidating or overwhelming. But the good news is we can't do this on our own. When we get tripped up or make regrettable decisions, God's grace and forgiveness are right there for us. It's all grace because we know through it all:

God is our Source.

God is our Guide.

God is our Goal.

From Beginning to End.

But it still behooves us to practice discernment because even though it's spiritually rigorous, it can spare us from a lot of heartache in our lives. Discernment takes the time to take stock, to courageously assess things.

Listen to the words of Jesus:

²⁸ "For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not first sit down and estimate the cost, to see whether he has enough to complete it? ²⁹ Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it will begin to ridicule him, ³⁰ saying, 'This fellow began to build and was not able to finish.' "

It takes guts to pull the plug on something, rather than getting deeper and deeper into something that's going nowhere.

Making good decisions is also like... unpeeling an onion—it involves a number of layers:

The Me—how will this decision impact me?

But that's only half of the equation.

There's also The We—how will my decision impact others?

You need The Me, The We, and also God in the mix. We are connected—individuals in community.

Next, ask "What's my context?" Context is everything. The pandemic is teaching us this. You do things differently depending upon the situation. Is it Italy, Sweden, New York, or Nebraska? Is it a large gathering or a small group? Is it urban or rural? Is it a younger population or an older population? Are people healthy or unwell? Will there be silence, talking, singing, or cheering?

Discernment is less like an on and off switch, and more like a dimmer or a dial. The dimmer adjusts the intensity of light. The dial adjusts the volume—to low, high, or medium. It's not about on or off—it's about degree.

Then we come to one of the hardest parts of the discernment process. Dare to ask yourself some tough questions, like:

- What am I missing here? Is there a bigger picture?
- What am I holding on to that I need to let go of?
- What's not working in my life right now?
- What patterns have gotten me into trouble before?

It takes humility to cross-examine your own ideas. Be willing to have your assumptions crucified at the cross of Christ. Receive feedback and criticism: sort out the meat from the bones. Try something different—try to prove yourself wrong on occasion. Expose yourself to different ideas—get a little pushback. It will sharpen you. Don't just read and listen to voices that only confirm what you believe. It's good to get a little curious.

"I don't like that man," Abraham Lincoln once said,
"I must get to know him better."

Stop white-knuckling what needs to be dropped. Your ideas about God are not the same as God. Tightly hold on to God and God's Word, but hold lightly to your ideas about God, your interpretations. God will never let go of you, but he will change you and transform your thinking—if you stay open to the Holy Spirit.

US Supreme Court Justice John Marshall Harlan was a white supremacist. He used to own slaves. He was staunchly against the Reconstruction Amendments to the US Constitution that prohibited the government from discriminating on the basis of race.

Yet Justice John Marshall Harlan's dissenting opinion in the 1896 case of Plessy vs. Ferguson shocked many. The majority of the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of racial segregation. This ruling was later over-turned by Brown vs. Board of Education. But Harlan dissented. His critics accused him of flip-flopping. He was questioned about his decision-making skills.

His answer? I'd rather be right, than consistent.

"One mark of a great mind," says Walter Isaacson, "is the willingness to change it."

There can be times flip-flopping is a great act of faith.

It takes an enormous amount of discernment, discipline, and humility to know when to stay the course... and when to course correct. There is a time and a season for both.

At the end of the day, Paul tells us, we're called to make the best choices and be the best people we can possibly be, in Christ Jesus.

The Spirit will help and hone our decision-making to discern and distinguish:

- The best from the good.
- The essential from the inessential.
- The majors from the minors.
- The profitable from the unprofitable.
- The wheat from the chaff.

By emptying ourselves of our pride and opening our clenched fists, we can be filled to overflowing with God's knowledgeable and wise love. In fact, we won't have enough room to contain it. It will spill over to those around us. Love will inform our decisions, our positions, and our actions.

And you know what? Even if we all practice discernment, we'll still disagree. That's okay. Our unity is in Christ, not our understanding of Jesus.

So let's keep fixing our eyes on the one Jesus, that we see from different angles. Let's keep moving forward, allowing Christ to live through us, bearing the fruit of good deeds and kind acts, that will feed multitudes.

And most importantly, no matter who we are, may all that we say and all that we do bring glory, honor, and praise to God and God alone.

Amen.

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