**GUIDANCE Core Seminar**

**Week #6: Circumstances, Feelings, and Wisdom**

**Introduction**

Good morning! Today we’re in the second half of a two-part series on the tools God’s given us to make decisions. Last week we looked at how to use—and not use—the tools of God’s word, prayer, and the counsel of others. So this morning we’ll look at two final tools Christians can use to make decisions: circumstances and feelings. And then we’ll wrap up with a look at wisdom, which kind of encompasses everything we’ve been talking about.

You’ve probably noticed that this whole class has had a pretty anti-mysticism slant to it. And that’s going to continue today. I think that evangelicals tend to be way too mystical in their understanding of how God normally guides us. We talk about following God as if it’s mainly about wise discerning of different senses and promptings we get from the Spirit. Or we say things like, “God told me to” do something when we aren’t referring to an audible divine voice. Since we’re going to continue on this anti-mysticism campaign this week, let me just open this up as a question. **What goes wrong when we assume that God normally guides us in mystical, sensational ways?** (touch on the following four as they come up)

1. First, it takes what is clearly abnormal in Scripture and assumes it’s normal. His normal guidance is through the wisdom he’s given us, fed by his word, informed by counsel, circumstances, and feelings, and sanctified by prayer.
2. Mysticism makes God seem tricky and sly instead of loving and kind. What good parent makes it hard for her kid to know what to do? How much less God? If God wants you to do something, *he’ll tell you*. And you won’t have any question but that it’s God speaking to you.
3. A focus on mystic senses of guidance suggests that God’s word isn’t sufficient for helping us make decisions. When quite clearly it is.

**Circumstances**

So first, circumstances. Like we did last week, we’ll start by thinking about how to *not* use circumstances.

*Wrong Ways to “Read” Circumstances*

* Seeing God as having “opened” or “closed” doors. There’s a way in which this can be good, as we’ll see in a moment. But there’s also a mystical way to view this which is just nonsensical. So a guy says, “I’d planned on proposing to Mary but it rained both times I wanted to ask. I feel like God just might be closing the door on our relationship.” NOOOO! It just means that God was either giving you a soggy engagement or a different day. There is no larger significance to that pattern of events.
* Bad circumstances mean I missed God’s will. In other words, if things don’t turn out like I hoped, I must have made a bad decision. Did Jesus make a bad decision to go to the cross? Did Paul make a bad decision to go to Rome? Where on earth do we get the idea that following God should be daises and roses?
* Thinking that accepting an impossible circumstance is a sign of weak faith. Putting my grandmother in hospice means I don’t believe that God can heal her. Giving up on being a missionary to Nepal because I’m paralyzed means I don’t have faith. OK. That would be true if God divinely revealed that he would heal my grandmother. Or if he divinely revealed that I should go to Nepal. But the bull-headed, “I’m going to do what God wants regardless of the circumstances he throws in my way” often way over-estimates our confidence in knowing what God wants.

*Right ways to use circumstances*

And that leads to some good ways that we can use circumstances to make decisions. Basically, we’re doing well when we see circumstances as the good acts of a sovereign God. Like we talked about in week #2, God’s going to accomplish all his good purposes for this world. Every last one of them. And no bad decision of yours—or anyone else’s for that matter—is going to stop him. What wonderful news!

What does that mean for our decisions? It means we can trust God’s plan.

Sometimes in God’s sovereignty, he uses circumstances to make a decision for us—or to shut one down. I love how pastor Matt Chandler talks about his wife. “You know how I know that she’s the one woman in the world for me? Because we’re married!” Was it God’s will for him to marry her of all the women on the planet? Absolutely. How does he know? Because they got married. As simple as that.

Or I’ll give you an example from my life: for years, my wife and I had thought and prayed about going overseas as missionaries. We trained with that in mind. We structured our jobs with that in mind. We managed our finances with that in mind. We spent time in the city in Afghanistan where we thought we might work. But then some long-term medical issues arose and it became quite clear that this was not God’s plan for us. Now, was that a lack of faith? If God had made it objectively clear that we should go to Afghanistan, it most certainly was. But we didn’t have that kind of certainty. Instead we just had a sense that moving there would be a wise use of our lives. So I can safely say that God closed the door on that opportunity—which is why we’re here now.

Sometimes circumstances tell you something about yourself. If you can’t throw a ball to first base, it’s unlikely that God is calling you to try out for the Nats. Why is that not a lack of faith? Because God hasn’t clearly told you to be a Nat. If you keep getting shot down for a particular type of job, it may be that God hasn’t equipped you to be in that line of work. Step back, talk with some good friends who know you well, and reassess what you’re good at.

“But,” you’re thinking, “didn’t you just rag on the whole ‘God closing doors thing’ a few minutes ago?” Not in this way. What I was critiquing was a kind of mystical “reading” of circumstances that points to God’s secret will for my life that, bizarrely, he doesn’t seem interested in making more clear to me. That would be like us deciding not to go to Afghanistan because the last flight before us crashed—like it was a bad omen or something. No—what I’m talking about is a humble recognition that within God’s good control, circumstances have changed and my plans no longer seem wise.

When that happens, my job as a Christian is to fight to thoroughly and completely believe that God’s plans are always good for his children. As the old hymn puts it that we sing sometimes,

Whate’er my God ordains is right,

He never will deceive me

He leads me by the proper path,

I know He will not leave me

I take, content,

What He hath sent

His hand can turn my griefs away

And patiently I wait His day

Someday, in Revelation 15:4 we’ll say those wonderful words, “your righteous acts *have been* revealed,” and we’ll understand what God was up to. We don’t have that knowledge now; we live by faith and not by sight. And so we trust that whatever our God does is right—and when he has definitely closed a door on our life, it is for our good and his glory.

There is a humble sweetness and contentment in life that comes from patiently accepting what God has done rather than bitterly fighting against it. Sometimes it feels that God uses circumstances to put your dreams to death. But as Christians, we need to hold those dreams with an open hand and trust that whenever he takes away, he is leaving something better in its place. Though we may not understand how it’s better until heaven.

Does that lead us to a lazy complacency? It certainly can. That’s where the apostle Paul’s counsel can be a good guide. In 1 Corinthians 7 when Paul writes to slaves, he writes, “Were you a bondservant when called? [that is, when called to faith in Christ] Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity.) For he who was called in the Lord as a bondservant is a freedman of the Lord.” Did Paul hate slavery? Certainly. In 1 Timothy 1:10 he lists “enslavers” alongside murderers, men who practice homosexuality, liars, the sexually immoral, and perjurers as the “lawless and disobedient.” And yet he tells the slave not to worry about the circumstance he’s in. Trust God’s providence, knowing that one day God will right that wrong. But Paul doesn’t call for complacency; if you can undo that evil, go for it! There is an openhanded ambition here that is a good example for us. On the one hand, it’s ambitious: if you can change your situation, do it. But it’s openhanded: if you can’t, don’t let it bother you. God will one day do what you cannot—and you can rest content in his good timing.

***Questions?***

**Feelings**

One of the most challenging aspects of decision-making is what to do with our feelings. What about those hunches, those subjective senses that God wants us to do something? Should we ignore them because feelings are unreliable? But if we ignore them, are we potentially guilty of “quenching the spirit[[1]](#footnote-1)?”

I think a good introduction to this topic is a little article Mark Dever wrote a few years ago. I’ll read it to you.

I do believe that God’s Spirit will sometimes lead us subjectively. So, for instance, I am choosing to spend my life here on Capitol Hill because my wife & I sensed in 1993 that that is what God wanted us to do. However, I realized then (and now) that I could be wrong about that supposition. Scripture is NEVER wrong. I was free in 1993 to stay in England, or teach at a seminary, either of which would have been delightful opportunities. I understand that I was free to make those choices. But I chose, consulting Scripture, friends, wisdom, and my own subjective sense of the Lord’s will, to come to DC. And even if I were wrong about that, I had (and have) that freedom in Christ to act in a way that is not sin. And I understand my pastoring here not to be sin. So I am free. Regardless of the sense of leading I had.

Most decisions I’ve made in my Christian life, I’ve made with no such sense of subjective leading. Maybe some would say that this is a mark of my spiritual immaturity. I understand this to be the way a redeemed child of God normally lives in this fallen world...

A subjective sense of leading–when we’ve asked for it (as in James 1:5 we ask for wisdom) and when God freely gives it–is wonderful. The desire for such a subjective sense of leading, however, is too often, in contemporary evangelical piety, binding our brothers and sisters in Christ, paralyzing them from enjoying the good choices that God may provide, and causing them to wait wrongly before acting.

Beware of the bondage of "guidance."

*Wrong Ways to Use Feelings*

Like we did before, let’s start with some wrong ways that we can use feelings in decision-making.

1. Assumption that an inner prompting is definitely the Holy Spirit. As Mark just said, he had an inner prompting to move to DC. But while he knew that his feeling could have come from the Spirit, he was well aware that it might be nothing more than a feeling. Christians get into trouble all the time when they sense God is leading them to something and then believe that that impression is God’s absolute, unmistakable direction for them.

How many times have I had Christians look at me indignantly and say, “but God *told* me to [fill in the blank].” When what they mean is not, “Jesus appeared to me in a vision and gave me clear instruction” but “I had a feeling during my quiet time that God was leading me that way.” Feelings are good, but they are not reliable. Let’s get rid of the wretched “God told me” language entirely—unless of course God really *told* you.

1. Not acting until we feel an inner “peace.” How did the apostle Paul arrive in Corinth? 1 Corinthians 2:3, “I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling.” Did Paul have a sense of peace about going to Corinth? Certainly doesn’t sound that way. Maybe that’s why Jesus himself assured him in a vision, Acts 18, that no one would attack him or harm him.

I remember counseling someone who, as best I could tell, refused to do what was plain in Scripture. “I just don’t have a sense of peace about it.” I think that was elevating the reliability of a sense of peace—or lack thereof—way higher than it should have been. Especially given the vicissitudes of our hearts, obedience may often lead in places where we do not have peace.

I could keep going, but I think you get the point. Feelings are good—but they are not reliable indicators of God’s will. Sometimes Christian leaders talk about leadings, hunches, and senses as if they have this special inner conversation with God that allows them to make supernaturally prescient decisions. “How did you know to plant a church in that washed out city?” “Well, God told me to, so I obeyed.” That may *sound* good and pious—but except in extremely unusual situations, that’s just not what happened. You just can’t know if your impression is God’s voice or not. But I can assure you that if he wants to tell you something, he’ll absolutely make sure you know.

*Right Ways to Use Feelings*

OK. With that load off my chest, how *should* we use feelings in our decisions? Let me give you three categories.

1. Intuition. God is absolutely amazing in how he’s made our brains. And as it turns out, our brains are sometimes smarter than we give them credit for. You are constantly assembling information about the world around you, even beyond your rational thought process. Sometimes that leads to an intuition that you should do something even if you can’t explain why. And sometimes you’re right. Over time, each of us will learn how much we should trust our intuition, or “gut” feel about things. Now, we need to remember that as fallen creatures our thinking—conscious or subconscious—is deeply flawed and sinful. Which means our intuition is not a reliable guide. But nonetheless sometimes it’s worth taking into account, always subjecting it to the perfect authority of God’s word. And likely if you’re 60 you can give it more weight than if you’re 40, and if you’re 40 you can give intuition more weight than if you’re 20.
2. Leadings prompted by the Spirit. Now, sometimes our feelings are more than mere intuition. Remember Mark in that article I read earlier talking about a subjective sense that he should give up an academic career and come to a little dying church in (at the time) a dangerous neighborhood on Capitol Hill. Was that the Spirit’s leading? Well, in retrospect it certainly seems to have been a good decision. But Mark was wary of his ability to discern whether that subjective sense was God’s spirit or not. When he felt that after visiting CHBC for the first time, he asked God to give his wife Connie the same sense if DC was a good place for them to go. But he didn’t say anything to her. When he got back, she told him of this strange burden *she* had for that little church on Capitol Hill. He still didn’t tell her what he was feeling—but he encouraged her to visit as well. And only after she returned talking about her sense that they should move her did he reveal what he’d been feeling. I think that’s a great example of believing that God *could* be using that inner subjective sense to guide us—while still maintaining an appropriate skepticism about our feelings.
3. Desires. Probably the greatest value of our feelings is that they tell us what we want. As a gauge of what’s going inside—what we value, what we fear—they are invaluable. If on the other hand you’ve decided that maturity in Christ means ignoring your feelings, you’ve abandoned one of the most valuable tools Jesus has given you for your walk with him. Who can forget that great promise in Psalm 37, “Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.” Yes, your desires will change as you delight yourself in the Lord—but they’re still desires, aren’t they?

Understanding our desires is important for a few reasons.

* First, in God’s kindness, he often gives us wide latitude in what we do in life—and often being happy in him will involve doing what we want. Should you marry godly man Joe or godly man Tim? Well, who do you want to be with for the rest of your life?
* Second, we will often serve him better doing what we want. You love teaching kids. You deplore balancing books. My guess is that you’ll more easily “work as unto the Lord” if you’re a school teacher than if you’re an accountant. If God providentially makes you an accountant, you can certainly be faithful there. But if you can gain your freedom from accounting, do it! How wonderful it is when we do what we enjoy! How much easier it is to serve him with all our heart!
* Third, our desires can reveal where our hearts are attached to something *other* than God. Think of James 4 where our desires come from spiritual adultery—when we want something more than we want God. Learn to read your heart through the lens of your desires so you can confess sin and correct for it in the decisions you make.
* Fourth, our desires can be good. The more you want what Jesus wants in your life, the more trustworthy your desires will be. How do we get there? Through the regular disciplines of the Christian life—prayer, time in God’s word, repentance, and obedience.

I find that Christians are sometimes surprised how often big decisions basically come down to what you want to do. This is where poor concepts of guidance can get in our way. “So you’re telling me that I should marry Joe simply because I want to?” “Well, you’ve done your homework: he’s a mature Christian, you love being in the same church, you seem to communicate well together, and you love being with him. Why not?” “But how do I know that he’s the One God has for me?” “That’s just not how God operates. He says in 1 Corinthians 7 you can marry anyone you wish, so long as he’s in the Lord. You have freedom here. So if you want to marry him, *marry* him!”

Let me sum up this section on feelings with four guidelines for listening to your feelings when you make decisions.

1. In humility, recognize that your feelings can be wrong. Pray that God would orient your desires to his desires. Be skeptical of your feelings—like Mark was when he came to DC. And above all else, never elevate your feelings over God’s word—and probably never over the strong, godly counsel of others.
2. Discuss your motives with those who know you well. Part of being a Christian in a fallen world is leaning to make decisions with mixed motives. Simply knowing that your motives are mixed—because they often will be—is no reason to avoid making a decision. But a friend can help you correct for ungodly desires or fears that you know you have.
3. Use appropriate vocabulary to describe your feelings. Not “God told me” or “God led me to” but “I feel as if it would be wise for me to…” or sometimes even, “I feel like God has given me a desire to…” Even the phrase “discerning God’s will” can be really confusing—because it suggests that our job is to hunt for his secret plan instead of using the wisdom he gave us to make a decision. If God wants to reveal his will, you won’t have any problem discerning it.
4. Correct for your natural biases. Are you hesitant by nature? You may need to learn to make decisions even when you’re uncomfortable. Or in Christianese, “not at peace.” Are you rash by nature? You may need to learn to subject your desires to the opinions of others before you act on them.

***Questions?***

**Wisdom**

Well, those are our five tools. God’s Word, Prayer, Counsel, Circumstances, and Feelings. But we haven’t described using these tools to *discern* God’s will—as if it’s a hidden secret and we’re on some kind of treasure hunt. Instead, we’ve talked about using them to pursue *wisdom*. Which is where I want to finish off.

As we said in the first class, the Christian approach to decision-making is to determine what is wise, and then to do it. What is wisdom? Biblically, we can boil it down to two things: right thinking and right doing. Wisdom is knowing God’s ways and truth, and acting in the light of what God has said to be true. Almost everything we’ve taught so far in this class has been about that: acting wisely.

And so it’s not surprising that in the Bible, wisdom is linked very closely to God’s will. Listen to Paul in Ephesians 5:

**15**Look carefully then how you walk, *not as unwise but as wise*, **16**making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. **17**Therefore do not be foolish, but *understand what the will of the Lord is*.

How do we know what the Lord’s will is? Pursue wisdom. Don Carson puts it this way: “Spiritual wisdom and understanding constitute the means by which God fills us with the knowledge of his will[[2]](#footnote-2).”

How do we become wise then? Well, as the Proverbs tell us, it is a lifelong pursuit. Not something we start simply because we have a big decision to make. Listen to Proverbs 2:

**1**My son, if you receive my words
    and treasure up my commandments with you,
**2**making your ear attentive to wisdom
    and inclining your heart to understanding;
**3**yes, if you call out for insight
    and raise your voice for understanding,
**4**if you seek it like silver
    and search for it as for hidden treasures,
**5**then you will understand the fear of the Lord
    and find the knowledge of God.

**9**Then you will understand righteousness and justice
    and equity, every good path;

Notice the imperatives—they seem to escalate in their intensity. Receive my words. Treasure up my commandments. Make your ear attentive to wisdom. Incline your heart to understanding. Call out for insight. Raise your voice for understanding. Seek it like silver—search for it as for hidden treasures. Then you will understand the fear of the Lord. Then you will know every good path.

Wisdom will not come to you. You must go get it.

And how do we get it?

* Fear God. As Proverbs 9 puts it, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight.” We begin to grow in wisdom as we orient everything in our lives around Him. As we seek first his kingdom and his righteousness. Fearing God precedes thinking like him and living for him.
* Use the means of grace. That’s largely been what this class has been about. Spend time in God’s word. Not merely to make a decision, but to grow in wisdom every day. Pray, asking God for wisdom. Because in James 1 God promises to give you what you ask. Seek the counsel of others. Not merely about your decision but about your life. Learn to trust God for his providence and seek to shape your desires around what he desires.
* Obey. Job 28:28 puts it simply:  “Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding.” Do what you understand to be wise. Obey God, live in purity—and you will grow in wisdom.

So how do we normally make decisions? Is it dreams, visions, fleeces, talking donkeys, hunches, lots, and impressions? No: it is wisdom. Let’s pray daily that God would give us wisdom. And then make decisions freely and without regret.

Let’s pray.

1. 1 Thes. 5:19 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *A Call to Spiritual Reformation*, page 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)