**GUIDANCE Core Seminar**

**Week #5: Scripture, Prayer, Counsel**

**Introduction**

Good morning! You’ve found yourself in week 5 of the Guidance core seminar on how to make decisions. We spent the first few weeks of the class laying a foundation for how we make decisions, looking at God’s sovereign control over all our decisions, God’s will, and God’s goal for our decisions, which is that we be faithful as his stewards. So now it’s time to build on that foundation and think practically about how we can make decisions.

Just a reminder: this class is all about how Christians should *ordinarily* make decisions. Throughout Scripture, God guides his people through dreams, audible voices, prophets, visions, and so forth. And if you heard God’s voice from a talking donkey or a burning bush, decision-making would be pretty straightforward, right? Except that while God *can* guide this way—and has at times—this isn’t his normalpractice. Especially in an age when we have his Scriptures in full.

So you’ll need to give up on the expectation that you can rely on God speaking out of a storm or writing on the wall when you’re trying to decide whether to take your date to Chuck-E-Cheese or Chik-Fil-A. Absent this extraordinary, unusual guidance of God, how can we make decisions?

Well, for the next two weeks we’ll be doing an inventory of the tools God’s given us to make decisions. This week: the Bible, Prayer, and Counsel. Next week: Circumstances, Feelings, and Wisdom, which kind of sums up all of these.

[**Note: in each section there's a few thoughts on the wrong ways to use these tools. Instead of simply jumping in, ask the class for examples of how we can use these tools foolishly—and move from their answers to the manuscript as written.]**

**I. Using God’s Word**

*Wrong Ways to Use God’s Word*

Our first tool is God’s word. How does God’s word help us make decisions? Well, let’s start out by thinking of *wrong* ways that people think they can use God’s word to make decisions.

1) One good place to start: opening up to a random bible verse and applying it directly to your situation. There’s the old joke about the woman who opened up to Matthew 27:5 where it says of Judas, “he went and hanged himself.” Dissatisfied with that, she flipped open to another random page where she read at the end of the parable of the good samaritan, “You go, and do likewise.”

Right. Not how the Bible is supposed to be read. Opening randomly and assuming that a sentence devoid of context is God’s special message to you is a horribly mystical way to conceive of Scripture. That’s certainly not how Jesus used the Scriptures or how the Bible teaches us to read itself.

2) But that’s not the only wrong-headed way we use the Bible for guidance. A related error is taking verse out of context. How don’t know how many of you have read Peter Jenkins’ book *Walk Across America*. Well, in it he describes becoming a Christian, meeting a Christian woman Barbara, and proposing to her—not only proposing marriage, but that she quit her job and finish his walk across the continent with him. In church the next morning she hears Genesis 24:58 where Laban asks Rebecca “Will you go with this man?” about going with Abraham’s servant to marry Isaac. Barbara is transfixed: that question keeps ringing in her ears and she accepts the proposal.

Now, did God superintend for her to hear that passage that day? Certainly. Was it wise for her to marry Peter? Perhaps—though they eventually got divorced. Was Laban’s question a good one for her to be thinking through? Maybe. But here’s what’s critical: Should she have ascribed special significance to that question *because it came from the Bible*, as opposed to, say, hearing that question in a TV sitcom? Absolutely not. Because in its context Laban’s question has absolutely nothing to do with Peter’s proposal to Barbara. It was right of Rebecca to answer that question with a “yes.” But Rebecca’s situation in no way suggests that God would lead Barbara to give the same answer.

Just because a set of words come from the Bible doesn’t mean they are God’s message to you. They are God’s word only in as much as they are read as God intended for us to read them. In context. Applied

Greg Koukl from Stand to Reason Ministries has a saying that’s useful for us: “Never read a bible verse.” That’s right, “never read a bible verse.” In other words, *always* read Scripture with the benefit of its context. To give another example, consider Philippians 4:13. “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” Many Christians have taken this verse to mean that they can achieve all their dreams and goals in life by the strength of Christ. But, that’s not what this is talking about at all. The surrounding context makes clear that Paul is talking about *learning* contentment in Christ *through* both good and bad circumstances. Paul isn’t saying that he can accomplish anything through Christ, but that he can *endure* all things through Christ and still radiate contentment. Context is key, and affects the meaning of a verse significantly.

*Right Ways to Use God’s Word*

OK. So how *do* we use God’s word to make decisions? Let me give you four categories of guidance the Scriptures provide.

1) Specific commands. The most obvious way that the Scriptures guide us is through specific, clear commands. “Is it God’s will for me to leave my wife and marry another woman?” No. “Do not commit adultery.” Case closed. I know this seems obvious, but there are many times when Christians get all caught up in knots *feeling* God’s leading in one direction but *seeing* an explicit command in another. God never contradicts himself. If you feel God is leading you to commit adultery, I can guarantee you with 100% confidence that your feelings are mistaken.

2) Biblical principles. Of course, there are many commands in Scripture that don’t clearly outlaw a particular action but are really helpful nonetheless. Let’s say that you’re struggling with how you should respond to an invitation to a workplace lunch where one of your colleagues is going to announce his engagement to be married to his boyfriend. It’s not like he’s inviting you to his wedding. It’s not like the stated purpose of the lunch is to celebrate a gay marriage. But you know how the room’s going to feel when he makes his announcement. Is there a clear command in Scripture about this? No. But consider Ephesians 5:5ff, “For you may be sure of this, that everyone who is sexually immoral or impure, or who is covetous (that is, an idolater), has no inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience. Therefore do not become partners with them.” “Do not become partners with them.” That’s a really helpful principle to keep in mind as you wrestle through what to do. As is Romans 1:32, “Though they know God’s righteous decree that those who practice such things deserve to die, they not only do them but give approval to those who practice them.” How can you act so that you don’t partner with others in their sin, and so that you do not seem to give approval to their sin?

3) Biblical goals and motives. The Bible can judge the motives and goals we have in making a decision—and thinking about Biblical motives and goals can sometimes unmask what’s unbiblical in our hearts. If you’re dating someone and are seeking guidance as to whether they would be a good spouse, you can look to Proverbs 31 and see what a godly wife looks like or 1 Timothy 3 to see what a godly husband should look like. Or if we’re thinking about a career change and we want to assess our motives, we can look to passages like 1 Timothy 6:6-10 to show us the effects of sinful patterns of behavior, like the pursuit of riches instead of God.

It can help to write down all the motives and goals—both good and bad—that you have for a particular question. Then write down the motives and goals that you see in Scripture, along with passages that describe them. Spend time thinking through those passages, and pray that as you do that God will give you insight into where your hearts desires are right and where they’re wrong-headed.

4) Wisdom. Honestly the main way that the Bible helps us make decisions has nothing to do with decision-making at all. It’s simply the wisdom that you grow in as you spend more time in God’s word. If you spend zero time in the Bible until the day you need to decide if you’re going to marry your boyfriend or girlfriend, I can pretty much guarantee that the Bible won’t be of much use to you. Think of Psalm 1 where David writes, “Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinner, nor sits in the seat of scoffers, *but his delight is in the law of the Lord and on his law he meditates day and night.”*

Get to know the Scriptures! Think about them often. Read them often. Pray through them. Memorize them. Over time, they will shape you and give you wisdom—and more than anything, it is wisdom you need to know when a decision is important, and to make important decisions.

**III. Prayer**

So if you’ll take a look at your handout we are point 2, *Prayer*. Just like we did earlier, let’s start with poor ways to use prayer in making a decision.

*Wrong Ways to Pray*

1) This one’s pretty clear, but we should consider it anyway. We shouldn’t pray for God to do something he forbids. Like asking God to make a dating relationship with a non-Christian successful.

2) Asking for a sign. Some might call this the ‘wet fleece’ method, getting its name from the account of Gideon in the Book of Judges. “Lord, if you want me to take the job in Katmandu, let the headline in the *Post* tomorrow be about Nepal.”

What’s wrong with that? Well, mainly that God never promises to answer requests like that. In fact, quite the opposite he tells us in 2 Timothy 3:16-17, “All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” Is there any good work that you need some miraculous sign to accomplish? No. God’s given you everything you need.

“But didn’t Gideon get his wet fleece?” “Isn’t he in the Hebrews 11 hall of fame?” Well, yes, but even he knew he was pushing his limits with God in how he asked for his sign (Judges 6:39). He was responding to God’s audible command. And though he exercised faith, you can hardly read the account of his life in Judges and come away thinking that his life is exemplary for us.

It’s fine to ask God to make our decision clear. But we need to remember that in no way does he promise that. It might seem that asking for a sign is an indication of great faith. In actual fact, it’s often the opposite. We are afraid to make a hard decision, we struggle to trust God when things aren’t clear. So we ask for a sign instead. But God promises to care for us in every situation—even when things aren’t as clear as we’d like them to be. And he promises that his Word is sufficient all the time. So we can trust him as we make hard decisions.

*How to Pray*

So how should we pray? That’s the question Jesus answers in Matthew 6. “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.”

I want to note three things from this verse that should inform how we think about prayer in relation to guidance and decision-making. First, it is that a biblically informed prayer life will have as its reference God as *father.* The one who is a fortress and a refuge, a shield and a protector, is also *our father.* Jesus emphasizes this point in the very next chapter when he says, “If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!” When it comes to praying in regards to decision-making and guidance you can know that God will give you everything that is good for you. What a comforting promise!

Second, a biblically informed prayer life will place the ultimate purposes of God’s work in this world over and above our own desires. “Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done.” Showing humble submission and deference to the success of God’s work rather than the success of our own work. That’s not to say that we don’t desire the success of our own work, not at all. But in praying for God’s ultimate purposes before our own we’re recognizing the precedence God’s work takes over our own. And that places us in a better position to respond to trials and difficult circumstances with patience, trust, and joy rather than frustration, fear, and anger. So when we pray, let’s ensure that we pray with God’s ultimate purposes in mind.

Finally, our prayer should recognize a daily dependence upon God. Look down again at what Jesus says: “give us this day our daily bread”. Clearly alluding to the manna that came from heaven in chapter 16 of Exodus. God instructs the Israelites to only gather what they need for that day, otherwise the manna would rot. What God intended to teach them was to come to him *daily* for all that they would need. So feel the spiritual sigh of relief that comes when you’re facing a big decision, when you can rest in God’s promise to care for all that you need today, and every day.

A great practice is to pick some passages in the Bible that talk about your decision—perhaps Paul’s advice to slaves and masters in Colossians 3 for a work decision—and pray through them daily. Ask God to conform your desires to what you see in Scripture.

**Any questions?**

**III. Using Counsel**

Proverbs 16:9 reads, “The heart of man plans his ways, but the Lord establishes his steps.” The second part of that verse is a good summary of what we covered in the first few weeks of the class. We trust that in God’s good and sovereign providence, He has a purpose and a plan for each of us that He will carry out in our lives no matter what. And the first part of the verse refers to what we’ve covered today. As we plan our ways, we use God’s word, we use prayer; and finally in this section we turn to using counsel.

*Bad ways to seek counsel*

Now, are there bad ways to seek the counsel of others? You bet.

1) For starters, there’s the “selective counsel-seeker.” We don’t seek counsel of those who might disagree with us. That might be because we view counsel as a “check the box” activity rather than something we really need. So we only talk with people who we think will see things the way we do. Proverbs 24:26 says an honest answer is like a kiss on the lips…find people who are more intent on giving you honest answers than telling you what you want to hear.

Other times it’s less nefarious but no less foolish: we only talk with people in our own station of life. A woman seeks accountability for her dating relationship just from other single women. But consider the great perspective and hindsight she’s giving up when she does that! Maybe she did that because she just doesn’t know any married woman—which is a problem in itself. Or maybe she suspected that her single friends would be a little more understanding in their accountability. Or in her words “won’t ‘freak out’ so much at the stuff we do.” I hope you can see how stupid this is—and how easy it is to slip into that kind of thinking all the time.

2) Then there’s the person who places *too much* faith in counsel. Our elders sometimes encounter this. A guy talks to Mark Dever for 30 seconds on his way out of church and asks him a question. Mark gives him a quick answer and the guy takes it as solid gold, reliable direction. After all, he’s the senior pastor, right? But does he realize that 30 minutes with a good friend who’s admittedly less mature than Mark Dever might be substantially better than 30 seconds with Mark? Or there’s the person who essentially blames their decision on the counsel they’ve received. “I talked things over with Deepak and I think it’s best that I break off our dating relationship.” Poor Deepak! Don’t throw him under the bus just for giving you his thoughts on his situation. And, by the way, thanks for destroying Deepak’s ability to pastor your now ex-girlfriend now. Own your decision!

*Good ways to seek counsel*

Of course, when we’re wise in seeking counsel, it’s a massive blessing to our decision-making. Just think of what the Proverbs say about this:

**12: 15-** *The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice.*

**13:10-** *Pride only breeds quarrels, but wisdom is found in those who take advice.*

**15:22-** *Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed* **19:20-** *Listen to advice and accept instruction, and in the end you will be wise.*

So here’s some counsel on seeking counsel:

1) Who to talk to

Let me give you a few categories of counselors who will be good for you.

* First is the person who is godly and wise. That probably seems honest. But someone who has walked with Christ for a long time and has a long track record of faithfulness is going to be a great ally for you. And note that I said “godly *and* wise.” The two don’t necessarily overlap. You’re looking for someone who is a good decision-maker. Who has a track record of making decisions they’ll be happy with when they stand before the Lord some day.
* Second is someone who knows the Scriptures well. Of course, there should be a lot of overlap between the first and second category. But there are some wise and godly people who just aren’t as adept at matching your situation with chapter and verse. Someone who knows her bible well is going to help you see which Scriptural principles will be good to consider in your situation—like the examples from Ephesians and Romans I mentioned earlier with the gay marriage announcement lunch.
* Third is someone who knows you. Who knows you well enough that they don’t need to rely on what you say to give you advice? Incidentally, as great as biblical counselors and pastors are, this is one of their limitations. The information they get about a situation is all from you. Which means that despite your best efforts, it’s intensely biased. And their advice is only as good as the information you have. Parents, your spouse, long-time friends, and your roommates are great here. Parents are especially overlooked, especially if they’re not Christians. But Christian or not, their amazing knowledge of you is really valuable and assuming you can filter well for their biases and they feel comfortable giving you counsel even if you disagree with them, you should seek their advice.
* Fourth is someone who knows your situation. Let’s say you’re considering a job transition. You really need to talk with someone who knows the job you’re considering—and ideally someone who’s made the same job switch you’re now thinking through. These people may often be better at providing information than advice, but they are so helpful.

Now, ideally you have all these people wrapped up together into one amazing package. But often you don’t. And besides, you probably want to talk to a few people in each category if the decision’s a really big one. So seeking counsel often involves talking with quite a few people.

2) Know your advisors first. It’s a shame when you realize that there’s no overlap between category three and the other categories I just listed. So don’t let that happen to you! Make sure that you’re building relationships with wise, Godly people so that over many years they get to know you really well. That’s good for you, good for them, and good for when you have a big decision to make. Can you name who those people are for you?

3) Be completely honest. Again, seems obvious but how often we don’t do this. Talk honestly about what direction you’re leaning—don’t just paint a one-sided picture and hope they agree with you. Talk about the temptations you know you face or the idols you know your heart is pulled to. Talk about where you got the information you’re basing your decision on. Talk about ways in which you’ve sinned that might affect your decision. You know, not “I’m thinking of marrying Jack, and you should know that we’ve struggled a bit in our boundaries” but “I’m thinking of marrying Jack, and it’s important for you to know that we fell into sin two weeks ago and had sex.” What benefit is there to you to hide your sin?

Now, your degree of transparency will depend on which category of advisor we’re talking about. But especially in category 1 where you’re talking with a wise and godly person—and often category three—you need to find someone with whom you can be completely transparent.

4) Talk things out. Some of you are internal processors. You make decisions inside your head. Some of you are external processors. You really need to talk things out. If you’re in the latter category, make sure your advisors know that. And talk things out.

5) Get your counselors talking. Remember those four different categories of people I laid out earlier? Why not get them talking together about your situation? I’m amazed at how seldom we take advantage of this. Make them kind of like your little personal board of directors. Take them all out for lunch. Give them 45 minutes without you there to talk through the decision you need to make. Then join them for the next thirty minutes to see how they’re thinking together. What an amazing, untapped resource!

Questions?

**Conclusion**

As we close today let’s consider again some of the tools we use in seeking guidance. First, we use God’s word. We want to understand it in context, meditate upon it and seek to apply it to our specific situations. Second, we use prayer. We call daily upon our God and Father to do His will and use us to glorify Him in all that we do, and we ask all things in accordance with what he’s revealed in His word. And finally, we use counsel to help us consider the various choices we may have, and we trust that as we plan wisely, God will guide sovereignly. Next week we’ll look at understanding circumstances, using feelings, and biblical wisdom as another set of tools that we can use to seek guidance. See you then!