2017-07-30

Counsel and Decision-Making

Passages: Various (heavily from Proverbs)

Opening before class

- Becoming/Relevant/Journey picnic: 1-5pm (25min from CFC)
    - 1400 Lake Fairfax Dr., Reston, VA 20190
- Breakup class into 3 small discussion groups
- Pass out notebooks and pens
- Pass out any handouts for class

Teachers Intent

We all make decisions every day, and quite often our decisions are influenced by the counsel of those around us. The Scriptures give some basic clear-cut commands for us to obey, and as we obey those commands we are granted life experience that enables us to draw secondary principles from the basic commands. The experiences of others allow us to fill in the gaps we are lacking from clear commands in Scripture.

Review

We've been going through the book of Proverbs lately, covering various aspects of wisdom and general living. I know at the beginning of the series we covered some benefits of Proverbs, but I want to review some key concepts about Proverbs and wisdom living.

Class Question: What is the intent of the book of Proverbs?

To change the way we think and then live.

Class Question: Why do we first need to change how we think?

How you think controls how you act.

Proverbs 4:23 Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.

Heart (Strong's #3820, #3824): Your source of inner life, will, or intellect.

When I was a younger man, my father and I would frequently talk about world affairs, and I would often make remarks to the effect of "the world would be better off if everyone did as I told them."

I'm sure no one else can relate to making such a foolish statement in their youth.

Many times my father's reply was a short rhyme I remember to this day:

"A mind changed against its will is of the same opinion still."

Our reason for gathering today and hopefully every time we assemble, is to conform us to the image of Jesus Christ. It is to change our *hearts*, our inner self, to be in alignment with Christ and then demonstrate that inner change through or actions.

- "The great aim of education is not knowledge but action." - Herbert Spencer (English philosopher, 1820-1903).
- **Romans 12:2** Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.
- **Matthew 7:24 (Jesus)** Everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock.
- **James 1:22** Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.

Introduction

The topic I want to talk about today is something we would probably consider simple, yet deceptively so. Deceptive in that, if I asked for a list of the top 10 things that change the course of your life, I suspect many of us would list the effects of it, but not mention this root cause. Simple in that we are influenced by it so often we may not even recognize it.

What I want us to investigate together today are some concepts about counsel and decision making, both the giving and receiving of counsel.

It's hard to find a more practical and important topic than the process of making decisions, and I submit to you that many of our decisions are heavily influenced by the counsel of those closest to us, be they friends or family.

George Washington (yes, THE George Washington), lost his father at age 11, and for a while young George was determined to join the British navy as a young officer. However, his mother

and his uncle had some issues with that plan and urged him to reconsider, based heavily on his uncle's knowledge of how the British navy would have treated young George. Now what did George do? Did he:

(A) Ignore the concerns of his mother and uncle, join the British navy, and be remembered as a no-name British naval officer?
(B) Inform his family that he had the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit and was thus capable of determining what was best for him on his own and did not need their counsel?
(C) Heed the counsel of others and eventually lead the Colonial forces to independence from Britain and become the first President of the United States, remembered as a great leader and follower of Christ? (one of these is not like the others…)

What place does counsel that comes from experience have for Christians in making Godly decisions? Am I not capable of reading the Scriptures on my own and being enlightened by the Holy Spirit? Those are some of the things we're looking at today.

What is Counsel?

For this discussion, I want to define counsel in a particular way. This is not a dictionary definition:

Counsel is a process of combining Biblical principles and life experience to solve a particular problem. Let's unpack that real quick:

- **Process** - Takes time and careful thought and may need repetition.
- **Biblical principles** - God's Word is our foundation and source of wisdom, but it does not always provide a step-by-step instruction manual. Sometimes we must find principles and apply them to situations in ways the Bible does not directly address.
- **Life Experience** - This is the application of Biblical principles. Sometimes a principle may not be understood until it is carried out. This is the effect of applying Biblical principles. Your experience often reshapes your understanding of the Biblical principle.
- **Particular problem** - Applies to an individual or single situation; someone else may be given completely different counsel depending on their circumstances.

So that's your fancy definition. To break it down to the most basic definition, what we're really talking about is the process of people making recommendations to each other about how to live a Godly life.

Too often we think of counsel with regards to the big decisions: where do I go to school, who do I marry, what job do I take. However, every single day we are making a large number of decisions based on the counsel of others around us. What I really want us to think about today are patterns for making decisions and giving and receiving counsel.

Prevention, not strictly a Cure

There's a saying that "an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure." Another way of saying this is "it's easier to walk around a pit than to climb out of it." I think we all understand what these little quotes are saying, but how often do we find ourselves repeating these same mistakes ourselves?

I would suggest that the majority of Proverbs and wisdom living is about prevention, not cures. It is about never getting into a problem in the first place.

Decision making involves Building Blocks

One thing I want us to consider is that our ability to make Godly decisions and provide good counsel is something that can be improved.

Many of you in the room are teachers. You know that there are core concepts that must be taught first before more advanced topics can be understood. For example, you wouldn't give a calculus problem to a First Grader who barely understands what addition is. That's because the child doesn't have the toolset necessary to solve the problem.

First, you need to teach the child how to do the simple act of adding two numbers. At this stage, it may involve memorization or rote obedience to the laws of math. In the realm of decision making, that would be like knowing and obeying the clear commands of Scripture. You can read them, understand them, and you know what to do given a specific situation. For instance, the Bible has a clear command to marry a fellow believer (2 Corinthians 6:14).

Eventually, however, our math child will run into a situation he can't solve with memorized math facts because it doesn't fit any of the simple, pre-defined rules he has encountered. At this point, he needs to understand the concepts behind math in order to apply them to more advanced situations. With regards to decision making, that could be encountering the question "should I marry this specific person?" You won't find a clear command in Scripture for this question, and we must move beyond simple commands into principles extracted from experience.

Obedience to the clear commands of Scripture provides an avenue for building up life experience, and experience is what enables us to convert the core commands into principles we can then apply to more advanced situations.

What are the benefits of counsel?

So with that background, I want us to discuss some things with our groups.

(10 min) Small Group Discussion Question: What does God say about counsel and decision making in the following passages? What are additional benefits of counsel you've encountered from your own life experience? Try to think in terms of specific commands as well as general principles.

Proverbs 3:5-7 5 Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; 6 in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight. 7 Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the LORD and shun evil.
Proverbs 5:11-13 11 At the end of your life you will groan, when your flesh and body are spent. 12 You will say, "How I hated discipline! How my heart spurned correction! 13 I would not obey my teachers or turn my ear to my instructors."
Proverbs 11:14 For lack of guidance a nation falls, but victory is won through many advisers. (note that a better translation may be: "...in multitude of counselors there is safety" [KJV])
Proverbs 12:15 The way of fools seems right to them, but the wise listen to advice.
Proverbs 15:22 Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed.
Proverbs 19:20 Listen to advice and accept discipline, and at the end you will be counted among the wise.
Proverbs 25:19 Trusting in a treacherous man in time of trouble is like a bad tooth or a foot that slips.
2 Chronicles 10:1-11 1 Rehoboam went to Shechem, for all Israel had gone there to make him king. 2 When Jeroboam son of Nebat heard this (he was in Egypt, where he had fled from King Solomon), he returned from Egypt. 3 So they sent for Jeroboam, and he and all Israel went to Rehoboam and said to him: 4 "Your father put a heavy yoke on us, but now lighten the harsh labor and the heavy yoke he put on us, and we will serve you." 5 Rehoboam answered, "Come back to me in three days." So the people went away. 6 Then King Rehoboam consulted the elders who had served his father Solomon during his lifetime. "How would you advise me to answer these people?" he asked. 7 They replied, "If you will be kind to these people and please them and give them a favorable answer, they will always be your servants." 8 But Rehoboam rejected the advice the elders gave him and consulted the young men who had grown up with him and were serving him. 9 He asked them, "What is your advice? How should we answer these people who say to me, 'Lighten the yoke your father put on us'?" 10 The young men who had grown up with him replied, "The people have said to you, 'Your father put a heavy yoke on us, but make our yoke lighter.' Now tell them, 'My little finger is thicker than my father's waist. 11 My father laid on you a heavy yoke; I will make it even heavier. My father scourged you with whips; I will scourge you with scorpions.' "

Rehoboam was the son of Solomon and heir to the unified throne of Israel; Jeroboam was a former official of Solomon. Rehoboam refused to listen to wise counsel and the kingdom of Israel split into ten northern tribes under Jeroboam and two southern tribes under Rehoboam. Listening to bad counsel literally lost him the kingdom.
Acts 17:11 Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.
Acts 18:23-26 23 After spending some time in Antioch, Paul set out from there and traveled from place to place throughout the region of Galatia and Phrygia, strengthening all the disciples. 24 Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. 25 He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervor and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John. 26 He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately.
1 Cor 15:33 Do not be deceived: "Bad company ruins good morals."
1 John 4:1 Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world.

- You have the wisdom of others to benefit you; don't have to relearn everything on your own. Learn from others' mistakes, not just your own.
- Covers any gaps in your own knowledge. Doubtful that any of us have all the historical/cultural/spiritual/practical knowledge to always make the right or best decision.
- Disciples others as they benefit from observing the process of making Godly decisions and furthering their own knowledge; sometimes it's helpful to discuss things with others for *their* benefit, not necessarily your own.
- Avoids misinterpreting the Holy Spirit or Scripture and claiming Divine support for our own ideas.
- Allows others the opportunity to feel involved and part of the process since your decisions often affect them as well.
- Avoids personal deception and seeking justification for our own sinful desires.
- Help us avoid false teaching.

"Wisdom is what's left after knowledge has been hammered by experience."

Why don't we listen to counsel?

We've seen that the Scriptures command seeking counsel and listening to others, and we've even compiled a list of benefits from our own experiences. Yet if everyone listened to counsel, we wouldn't need God to tell us to listen to counsel!

(5 min) Small Group Discussion Question: What are some reasons (both good and bad) we do not listen to the counsel of others?

- Expert fallacy: You don't have a degree in this field, so your view/opinion is not important or should not be taken as seriously as others. Positions/titles/degrees don't matter, only the truth matters.
- You messed up: You have messed up your life, so you can't provide beneficial counsel to mine. Often those who have "gone through it" can offer the best advice..
- Popularity: Most people disagree with you. Truth is not determined by majority opinion.
- Pride: Arrogance and refusal to humble yourself and admit being wrong.
- Sinful desires: Your counsel goes against their inner desires. Heart is deceitful.
- Dislike personality: You personally dislike the individual. Judge the merit of something, not the messenger.
- Fear: What will others think of me? We think others think about us more than they actually do.
- Unbiblical: Counsel is in direct violation of Scripture. For example, "if you're struggling with temptation, just give in to it!"
- Dangerous: Want some poison?
- Superior knowledge: You truly have more knowledge about a particular subject that grants you further insight. Involves a value judgment.
- Patience: Maybe you don't have all the facts yet or haven't heard both sides.
- Not ready: You know you aren't ready for what they counsel. Difficulty is that it may also be an opportunity for God to grow you and step out on faith.

Dangers of relying on Ourselves

There are many reasons we don't listen to good counsel, but I want to focus in on what I think are two of the most dangerous reasons:

- We've ignored good counsel so long that we are effectively blind to the situation and are unable to recognize what is right anymore.
- We use Scripture to justify a selfish or sinful desire.

Both of these really deal with the perversion of Truth, and as we discussed several weeks ago, *perversion* is the switching of right and wrong.

- **View Evil as Good**
    - Throughout Proverbs, Solomon (and other authors) talk about the Strange Woman and the consequences of young men not heeding counsel and avoiding her paths.
    - Using our ability to extract principles from specific situations, conceptually Solomon is saying that there are some areas in our lives that we can become so numb to that we become spiritually blind to them and are literally unable to heed good counsel because we no longer see it as good counsel!

        - **Proverbs 7:22-23** All at once he followed her like an ox going to the slaughter, like a deer stepping into a noose 23 till an arrow pierces his liver, like a bird darting into a snare, little knowing it will cost him his life.
    - Effectively, we have convinced ourselves that what was wrong is now right and we no longer see anything wrong with it.
        - **Hebrews 3:12-13** See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. 13 But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called “Today,” so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.
        - **Galatians 6:1** Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted.
    - This situation is very dangerous to be in, because how do you convince a blind person they are blind? If they are convinced everything is working properly, it’s really hard!
- **Pursue our own Lusts**
    - Another very dangerous situation we may find ourselves in when we continually reject good counsel is pursuing our own sinful desires but hiding behind “Scripture” to justify it to others and even ourselves.
    - This is difficult to spot, because it often masquerades behind the appearance of Godliness because Scripture is cherry-picked as justification.
        - **2 Peter 3:15-16** Bear in mind that our Lord’s patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. 16 He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.
        - **Jeremiah 17:9** The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?
    - If we say something loud enough, long enough, we begin to believe it and may end up thinking we’re doing God’s will when we are far from it.
    - Ends up using Scripture to support our desires instead of allowing Scripture to mold our desires.
    - If we see any positive results, reinforces our bad thought that this is God’s will. Can’t base “rightness” of a situation strictly on the outcome of it.

Practical steps to improve your ability to heed and given counsel

Now that we’ve looked at some benefits to listening to counsel and some reasons we often ignore counsel, let’s talk about some practical aspects.

(5 min) Small Group Discussion Question: What are ways we can improve our ability to listen to counsel?

- Listen: When they speak, don't be thinking of a response; focus entirely on what they are trying to communicate to you.
- Clarify: If you don't understand, ask! Communication goes both ways, combining the intention of the sender with what you as the hearer understood.
- Discipline: Improve your discipline. Often we may agree mentally with counsel, but not feel capable of actually fulfilling it because we lack the willpower.
- Put others first: Start by assuming you're wrong and the counsel of others is right, then try and convince yourself that the counsel is bad.
- Perspective: Try and view things from the perspective of the other person.

(5 min) Small Group Discussion Question: What are ways we can improve our ability to give counsel?

- Scriptures: Improve your knowledge of the Scriptures (Sunday School answer, but true!).
- Fix yourself first: Before you start making recommendations to others about their life, make sure you've addressed your own issues.
- Goes around comes around: Heed the good counsel of others and they will be more amiable to listening to yours.
- Patience: Be patient and allow others time to process your advice.
- Don't assume: Make sure you understand the situation and aren't making assumptions.
- Say nothing: Sometimes saying nothing is the best advice we can give.
- Know the person: With some people, we can be blunt and direct and rip the bandaid off. With others, we have to be more careful with how we approach them. Neither is more right than the other, but you do have to know the individual and their particular personality.
- Timing: Know when your counsel may actually be listened to; wait for the best moment, don't just speak to make yourself heard.

Summary

- Obey the clear commands of Scripture and convert theory into knowledge.
- In so doing, you gain experience as you begin to extract principles of the unknown from obedience to what you do know.
- Share that experience with others as counsel to help them overcome their lack of knowledge.