



what? where? who?

Giles Cattermole considers guidance and God's will

PART 3: godly decision-making

This is the third and final part of a three-part series on guidance. Part 1 (God guides, we follow)¹ and part 2 (godly wisdom)² were published in the Spring and Autumn 2012 issues of *Nucleus* respectively. This time we'll turn to more practical application of what we've learned so far. It's important to remember this bigger picture of God's purposes before wrestling with specific issues in our lives. So to recap where we've got to so far: God is in control and God cares for his people. He guides us to bring about his loving plan for us. God's plan is to bring everything together under Christ's rule, and we see this now as his people live holy, obedient lives for his glory (Ephesians 1:3-10). Living rightly and responsibly according to God's plan is what the Bible calls wisdom, and we see God's wisdom most clearly in Jesus and his death on the cross for us (1 Corinthians 1:18-25).



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In 1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1 Paul gives a summary of his advice to Christians who are struggling with a difficult decision; should they eat meat sacrificed to idols, or not?

So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God - even as I try to please everyone in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved. Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.

When faced with tricky decisions, we're to glorify God, and we're to follow Christ's example.

But how do we do this? On our own we'd neither know how God wants us to live, nor have the ability to do it. God knows this, and he's given us the tools we need. Actually, he's given us himself! God's Spirit is with us when we seek guidance. He helps us understand God's Word, and helps us live it out.

Bible and prayer

The Bible is the sword of the Spirit (Ephesians 6:17). Sharper than any human sword, God's living Word judges our thoughts and attitudes (Hebrews 4:12). It equips us for every good work (2 Timothy 3:17). God speaks through the Bible to us today, and through it teaches us all that we need to know to be able to understand God's plan, and how to live obediently according to that plan. It's in the Bible that we see the big picture of God's plan for his people unfolding, and that we see Jesus as the fulfilment of that plan and the example for us to follow.

And because it is God's Spirit speaking through God's Word to make us more like God's

Son, we need to ask God to do this! We are totally dependent on God to bring the Bible alive to us, and to change us. So we need to come before him continually in prayer to ask him to show us and fulfil his plan in our lives. That's what Paul prays in Ephesians 1:15-19 and 3:14-21: having just told them what God's plan is for them, he prays that they would grasp it and live it.

So our tools are the Bible and prayer, in the power of God's Spirit. If you want guidance, make sure you're using the tools God has given you! They're sufficient for every good work. We can't hope to understand or become like Jesus, the Living Word, if we're not reading his written Word, which tells us who he is, why he came and what it means to follow him.

right and wrong, wise and unwise

But you're still thinking... 'OK, I realise that guidance really means obedience to what God has already told me; I need to be like Jesus. I get the big picture of building God's kingdom. And I get that from prayerful study of the Bible. But I still don't see how this helps me to know whom to marry, or what speciality to choose?' Nor perhaps to deal with a thousand other dilemmas!

I've found it helpful over the years to think of decisions as falling into three different types. Firstly, there are issues that are 'right and wrong'. Secondly, there are things that are 'wise or unwise'. Then there are things that just don't matter.

'Right and wrong' issues should be pretty clear. The Bible tells us all we need to know to live obediently; we are to love God and one another. It's full of application of those principles to God's people whatever their

circumstances; from God's commands to Adam and Eve, through the giving of the law in Sinai, to Jesus' teaching in the Gospels and further expounded in the apostles' letters. For example, murder is forbidden in Exodus 20:13, and Jesus applies this more thoroughly still in Matthew 5:21-22. We may have difficulty understanding - which is why we need to pray to ask God to make it clear to us. He may well use other, wiser Christians to help us, or good books that explain the Bible, but the more we read and pray the more we'll understand as God speaks directly through his Word. More likely though, we have difficulty obeying it - so we need to pray that God would make us obedient. And we know he will, if we ask him, because we know that's his plan for us!

'Doesn't matter' issues should also be fairly easy to deal with. What colour socks should I wear this morning? Please don't get hung up trying to find verses to tell us the answer to this one; it really shouldn't matter. I suppose there could be some extreme situations in which sock colour might matter: if sock colour became a cultural identification of one's faith? Or if it became illegal to wear certain socks? Silly examples, but we're already touching on the reasons why otherwise trivial things become important, become matters of wisdom: because they affect our witness and holiness.

The majority of our difficult decisions are matters of wisdom. There's no clear 'right and wrong'; it doesn't seem that one choice is sinful (because if it was obvious, then you wouldn't be asking for guidance!). But it's not trivial, it does seem to matter. These are the sorts of decisions that Paul was helping with in 1 Corinthians 10:31-11:1, and similarly in Romans 14. Eating meat, observing holy days: what are the principles? Glorify God, live like Christ. Make

sure we're loving God and others - even if the issue itself isn't a matter of right and wrong, our attitude in the way we deal with others is likely to be. But there's another crucial principle that we need to grasp: it's all for the building up of others in Christ; of not being a stumbling block - neither hurting the faith of fellow Christians, nor hindering others coming to know Jesus. Paul's priority in 1 Corinthians 10:32-33 is not himself, it's to please others. It's not about his own good, but theirs. But it's essential to get the context here: it's not some undefined 'good' he's trying to maximise, as though he's a utilitarian. He's not trying to satisfy others' 'felt needs'. No, he's specifically focussed on their salvation. That's the 'good' that he's seeking.

For Paul, issues matter because they impact on the growth of God's kingdom. So when we're faced with a decision, ask yourself how different options will affect your ability to live and speak for Jesus. How can you best fit your gifts to the needs of God's kingdom? To do this, you'll need to be clear about what the needs are, and what your gifts are. To see the needs, we've got to understand the Bible (so we know God's purposes), and we've got to understand the world we're in (so we can see how and where his purposes need fulfilling, and what opportunities are opening up for us). And an honest understanding of our gifts will help us see how we can be part of fulfilling God's purposes in his world. Practically, we need to be praying and reading our Bibles, and we need to be asking other Christians to help us - that's why we meet with one another (Hebrews 10:24-25) to spur each other on in love and good deeds: which we now know means our holiness and witness. In church, in CU, in CMF groups, in prayer triplets, in one-to-ones - apply what you're learning to your own circumstances:

what am I good at? How can God use me in partnership for the gospel?

Let's apply this way of thinking to a couple of concrete examples: relationships and careers.

marriage

Whom should I marry?

Firstly, deal with the issues of 'right and wrong'. If you're a man, your spouse must be a woman. An unmarried, Christian woman who isn't your sister. There's not much else that the Bible says would be a 'wrong' choice of spouse!

Secondly, what things don't matter at all? I don't think her hair colour should matter, or what her favourite pizza topping is. If we're really committed to building God's kingdom, whether someone is seen by others as pretty shouldn't matter either.

And there may be other things that shouldn't matter, but do become issues of wisdom for us, for the simple reason that we aren't fully Christ-like, and won't be until heaven. If I didn't still sin, then I'd have no need to consider the wisdom of choices that help or hinder my holiness. Instead though, I need to consider whether the person I marry will help me live more like Jesus; and will I help them do the same? For example, it might be really unwise to marry someone who annoys you intensely (Proverbs 21:9). In an ideal world of course, you wouldn't get annoyed. But you're not perfect, and neither are they; little irritations become resentments and anger.

And it's about your witness as well as your holiness: who will you best be able to partner with in evangelism? For example, one of you has a passion for mission in rural Africa, and the other is desperate to do children's work in inner-city UK. Would this be a wise match? Are your gifts complementary?

I don't think these examples are matters of 'right and wrong'; they're things you'd need to pray through together and with advice from others. But the key thing is to make sure that what shapes your thinking are God's kingdom goals. How can we best live and speak for Jesus? Together, or with someone else, or not married at all?

career

So what speciality should I do?

There are some professions that would fall into the category of 'right or wrong' - prostitute, cat-burglar, hitman - to think of a few that would be wrong. I'm not sure there are many issues of 'right and wrong' inherent to any particular medical speciality. But there might be 'right and wrong' issues about your motives (as there are with any issue!) - if you're choosing a speciality from laziness or greed, for example.

How much money you can earn does become a matter of wisdom though. There's nothing wrong with having a highly paid job. But consider firstly, from the perspective of your own holiness: will I be tempted to find my security in money rather than in Christ? Secondly, can I use that money to advance the work of the gospel? If you're a gifted surgeon, and can earn a lot of money, but you're not that great at teaching others the Bible, then perhaps the way kingdom-priorities will shape your career choice will be different from someone who is brilliant at teaching the Bible and not very good at surgery. The former could earn lots, and pay the latter to be a pastor.

If we think our gifts are best suited to a career in medicine, having a kingdom-perspective will help us consider which speciality enables us best to use our gifts to serve Christ and his people in medicine. Which


specialities will help me be more like Jesus? Which will help me make disciples? If your gift is in one-to-one evangelism with patients and colleagues, then choose a speciality that gives you opportunities to meet them! A 9-5 laboratory job might not be the best option to practise whole-person medicine and spiritual care of patients - but it might allow you to be a youth group leader. Which speciality could I best use overseas in mission? Or fit around part-time church work?

final thoughts

There is so much more we could consider about the wisdom of choices in marriage or work, and so many more issues we could discuss. I hope the above begins to make clear the sort of questions we should be asking in order to make wise decisions.

You might ask 'what if I get it wrong?' Well, we do get things wrong. We make foolish decisions. But God is sovereign, he's working out his plan and our mistakes are not going to jeopardise God's purposes! And God is loving, he doesn't want us to worry that we're somehow in 'plan B' if we mess up. After all, I wouldn't be in 'plan B' - I've messed up so many times I'd be in 'plan Z to the power of Z' by now. God doesn't work in 'plan Bs'. He has one plan, which he will see to the end. And as part of that plan, he will discipline us. We will make mistakes, and sometimes we have to bear the consequences - sometimes it'll be hard. But we will learn how to be more like Jesus (Hebrews 12:10-11).

You might still be asking 'why doesn't God just give me the answer straightaway?' Of course he might, and the Bible has lots of examples of God giving clear direction to his people at critical times. But we're not told to expect this day by day. God wants his people



to be responsible, to rule his world, making wise decisions themselves, but under his rule, obedient to his Word and trusting in his sovereignty. Maturity in Christ, in fulfilling our role as image-bearers, requires us to make decisions, and learn from our mistakes.

It can be dangerous to expect a direct word from God on a particular issue. Firstly, we can end up paralysed, unable to do anything until God's told me specifically to do it. Secondly, there is a danger of presumption, if through circumstances, coincidences or an inner peace, we think we've heard God's command when we haven't. Instead, we have God's clear Word in the Bible telling us to get out there and make disciples. We know what we need to do; we need wisdom to understand how best to do it.

Let's make God's priorities our priorities. Let's follow his prescription as he's already written it. Let's trust in his power and love to see us through to the end, the end that he's planned from before time. Guidance is a compass rather than a map; we often want to know exactly which step to take next, but God doesn't often do that. Instead he tells us which direction to go, and is with us as we go there. We might not know it all in advance, but when we look back, we can see how God led us through those opportunities and circumstances. We have been given great freedom by God to live in his world making decisions within the limits of what is right and wrong, and guided by the goals of his kingdom, becoming more like Christ. Let's keep on praying that he would help us understand his Word and live by it; let's keep on encouraging each other to do this. ■

REFERENCES

1. Cattermole G. what? where? who? *Nucleus*. Spring 2012. 21-23.
2. Cattermole G. what? where? who? *Nucleus*. Autumn 2012. 4-6