

"THE ART OF MAKING DECISIONS"

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PARK AVENUE METHODIST

TEXT: None.

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In recent years, we have seen a new kind of citizen invade our civilization. I'm referring to the mechanical men who can do many wonderful things. For instance, there is Willie, invented by Andrew Bober. Willie is a rather dapper metal man who can sing, dance, shoot a pistol, and even play a harmonica. And then there is Elektro, invented by Westinghouse. Elektro is another of these amazing personalities. He's seven feet tall, and weighs 260 pounds. He can smoke. He can count up to ten, and he can even deliver a speech with a vocabulary of seventy-seven words. Other mechanical men have been born in recent years, and have attracted our attention. In London, a few years ago, scientists developed a robot brain that is capable of signaling his own moves in a chess game, and never seems to lose.

These new citizens perform many useful functions. In some cases they save us from a lot of work, and do things that no one else wants to do. However, they have one serious limitation. They do not have the power of choice. It's true they can be directed to choose, but only on a predetermined and mechanical basis.

There are times when people think of themselves as machines without the power of choice. They see themselves as puppets controlled by forces and events far beyond their control. They go through the motions of freedom, but they have the feeling of being driven instead of directing themselves.

It shouldn't be this way. The Christian should not share this philosophy of determinism. He is not a puppet at the end of a string, or the tool of cosmic forces. Within the framework of God's laws, he is free to choose his own way, and determine his own destiny.

We recall that even Jesus was free to make his own decisions. When the possibility of the cross came into the picture, he did not submit to the fatalism of others. For he reminds us:

"No man taketh my life from me. I lay it down of myself....."

We need to recovery this capacity to choose. And we need guidance in making those decisions we ought to be making. It is well for us to consider some of the techniques that Jesus used in making decisions.

ONE TECHNIQUE that he used that we should practice is to make our decisions in the light of long range goals rather than short term desires.

The great French essayist, Montaigne, once said:

"A man who has not directed his life as a whole toward a definite goal cannot possibly set his particular actions in order. The archer must first know what he is aiming at, and then set his hand, his bow, his strings, his arrow, and his movement for that goal. Our plans go astray because they have no direction and no aim. No wind serves the man who has no port of destination."

We know that Jesus had such a port of destination. We first catch a glimpse of it in the experience at the Temple in Jerusalem early in his life. Mary, Joseph, and Jesus made a short trip to Jerusalem. While they were there, Jesus, only a twelve year old boy at the time, somehow got separated from his parents. They couldn't find him any where. They looked all around the city. Finally they found him in the Temple, sitting among the teachers, and asking questions. When Jesus saw them, he said to them:

"How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house attending to his business....."

Perhaps they were unusual words for a twelve year old boy. But this early announcement of his life's purpose set the direction for his other decisions. He measured all later alternatives by it. It carried him along. It made possible his final decision for the cross. He might have chosen some other way. He was free to do so, but he didn't. It was his own decision.

"No man taketh my life from me. I lay it down of myself....."

The skill of the men who fly the long range airplanes is outstanding. In good weather, and in bad weather, they take their planes to far distant places and back again. By the use of instruments, the navigator can tell where he is and direct the plane at any time. I understand that there are four types of navigation. Three of them can be used only under certain flying conditions. In times of uncertainty or crisis, the navigator will rely on the fourth, or the highest branch of his craft, namely celestial navigation. There are fixed stars above the clouds which at any given moment are over an exact and recorded position on the earth. With his instruments, the navigator steers his craft by these stars. They're a safe and certain guide to his destination.

In a similar fashion, it is important for us to decide to fly by the stars. That is, we must make some overall, long range commitment of life to the will of God. And then our choices along the way may be made in the light of this basic and fundamental choice. We need to find a great purpose in life. We need to relate ourselves to some high and lofty ideal.

"It was said of Columbus, that he didn't know where he was going when he set sail; he didn't know where he was when he got there; and he didn't know where he had been after he arrived back home."

We need to have a purpose in life otherwise we drift around aimlessly.

Many of us have trouble with our decisions because we make them on a day to day, hand to mouth basis. We're governed by short term goals. We have no fixed point of reference by which to steer our lives, and it's no wonder that we get lost in a fog of moral confusion. In times of uncertainty, it is well for us to ask ourselves the simple question: "What would Jesus do in this situation?"

We can think of men and women who lived their lives in the light

of one great compelling Christian ideal. There was Nehru, sitting alone in prison year after year for his convictions, saying that if he had to do it over again his "major decisions would remain untouched". There was Kagawa called "Christ's Fool" as he lived and taught among the outcasts in the slums of Tokyo.

Let a person make the basic decision for the will of God, and he will find help in all of his smaller decisions. Let him settle the big issues and the little issues will take care of themselves. We must learn to make our decisions in the range of long term goals, rather than short term desires.

ANOTHER TECHNIQUE that is very important in making our decisions is to make them on the basis of moral principle rather than personal popularity.

In 1521, the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles the 5th, called an imperial diet in Worms, Germany. One item on the agenda was to "Take notice of the books and descriptions made by Friar Martin Luther against the Court of Rome". The people jammed the streets of the town; they gathered around the Bishop's Palace. Luther was kept waiting two hours, and then he was called in. At one end of the crowded hall there stood the peasant son in his black Augustinian robes. At the other end there sat the most powerful king in the world. It was a great hour in history. All of Europe was watching to see what would happen.

The principal figures sparred with words for two days. Luther attacked the authority of the papacy and held for freedom of worship for the individual. Heavy inducements were offered if he would recant, and strong threats were made if he should not. Finally he gave his conclusive decision in these words:

"Since your Majesty and your Lordships ask for a plain answer, I will give you one without either horns or teeth. Unless I am convinced by Scripture or by right reason.....I am bound by the texts of the Bible, my conscience is captive to the Word of God, I neither can nor will recant anything, since it is neither right nor safe to act against conscience. God help me. I can do no other. Amen"

It was almost too much for the Emperor. He got up and left the hall. Luther slipped out of the city. A decision had been recorded that would shape history for centuries to come. It was the free choice of a single man against the ruling power and tradition of that time. And like all great decisions, it was made on the basis of moral and spiritual conviction, and not for personal popularity.

There is a phrase in Luther's decision that I would like to see us take to heart. "My conscience is captive to the word of God". It is this that ruled in his decisions. It is this that ruled in the decisions of Jesus. In the time of temptation in the wilderness, Jesus was called on to decide between his devotion to God, and the fabulous offers of wealth, power and personality. This is the meaning of his temptation in the wilderness, and his decision was clear and strong:

"Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. It is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord, Thy God, and him only shalt Thou serve."

There's something lofty here that shames our cheap choosing. So often we look for the easy way out. We'd like to take our ideas of what's right and what's wrong from the crowd we run around with. We're afraid we're going to be unpopular if we make our decisions according to our deep convictions. And so we choose the convenient rather than the constructive. We choose the fleeting pleasures rather than the permanent values. It's not always this way. Occasionally we see people who are willing to stand by their convictions. Only recently did I see a young lady connected with our church who placed her responsibility and her obligation to her church above her obligation to her profession. So often it turns out the other way. It's not easy. But hard choices make strong character. And it's only when our consciences become captive to the word of God that we really begin to live.

FINALLY, WE NEED TO MAKE our decisions at the level of our responsibilities and not at the level of our personal desires.

Several years ago, the steamer, "Fairfax" and the tanker "Benthis" collided off the coast of Massachusetts. The Fairfax caught fire. The crew jumped overboard deserting their posts. A crew member by the name of Lester Kober saved the ship. He went down into the deserted engine room to locate the trouble. He worked there in a dangerous smoke-filled room until the fire was put out. During the investigation that followed, he was asked why he had decided to do this. His answer was quite brief and to the point: "I saw that someone was needed there".

This kind of heroism is part of Christian character. One forgets his own safety in the service of others. He sees his duty and does it. He makes many choices, not from personal desire, but because he wants to fulfill an obligation.

We all have different responsibilities, but we all have responsibilities that stretch out beyond ourselves. We have a duty to our community. We have a duty to our families. We have a duty to our wives and our husbands. We have a duty to our work, to ourselves, and to God. We cannot do entirely as we please. We need to look up from our own individual pursuits and say with Lester Kober: **I SAW THAT SOMEONE WAS NEEDED THERE.** It puts character into life, and happiness into our hearts.

The father of Martin Niemoller, Heinrich Niemoller, said to Paul Harris, the founder of Rotary, during the days of World War II:

"Yes, it's a terrible thing to have a son in a concentration camp, but there would be something far more terrible for us, if God had needed a faithful martyr, and our son Martin had not been willing....."

The time has come for Christians to stop fussing over small matters. It is time for us to turn away from petty denominational loyalties, and prejudices. It's ~~time~~ no time for shoddy and shallow thinking. The line is sharply drawn. It is either Christ or chaos.

God grant that we may be willing to choose with courage instead of cowardice. God grant that we may be willing to decide for duty instead of pleasure. God grant that we may put our devotions to Christian values above our own personal desires. The Christian cause needs faithful witness, and it would be terrible for us and for history, if God should find us unwilling to choose for him.

For in the words of John Oxenham:

"To every man there openeth a way, and ways, and
a way.
And the high soul climbs the high way,
And the low soul gropes the low.
And in between on the misty flats the rest drift
to and from..
But to every man there openeth a high and a low,
And every man decideth the way his soul shall go."

LET US PRAY:

Help us, Our Father, that in all of our decisions we may
turn to Thee.....

Help us to keep in mind these techniques used by Jesus
in making his decisions.....

May we always make our decisions in terms
of long range goals, rather than short
term desires...

May they be made on the basis of moral principle
and not personal popularity...

And may we make them at the level of our ~~desires~~
responsibilities, and not at the level of our
personal wishes.....

For in so doing, we shall be serving Thee, and finding
new meaning and happiness in life. In Thy great name we
pray.....Amen.