



THE FIRST WORD

FROM FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH OF BONITA SPRINGS

CHOOSING WISELY

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Introduction to Scripture

I have here the dinner menu from a local Chinese restaurant. It's packed with page after page of options from which to choose: everything from appetizers to soups to entrees. Some of these selections I've had before and found delicious. Others don't sound too good to me. And, frankly, I have no idea what some of these are! Whenever Jeanne and I go to this restaurant or call it for take-out, we have a difficult choice to make. Of all these pages of meals, we can only choose and eat one of them that night. Sometimes it's paralyzing to have so many choices.

Life is a series of constant choices we have to make. Some of them are of as little consequence as what to eat for dinner that evening, or what clothes to put on that morning. Other choices are vastly more important, and are difficult to make, not because there are pages of options, but because the consequences are so profound and life-altering. Our topic for today is making wise choices as Christian men and women. The passage from God's Word we're going to study is found in the book of 1 Samuel in the Old Testament.

We will read here the story of a man named Sam who had to make a very difficult and important choice. He had to select a new leader for his country. He was, in effect, a one-man Electoral College. The pressure on him to make the right decision was very heavy. Fortunately, he was a man of deep faith who knew how to listen to God. Let's read what happens, in 1 Samuel chapter 16:

The LORD said to Samuel, "How long will you mourn for Saul, since I have rejected him as king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and be on your way; I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem. I have chosen one of his sons to be king."

...

⁴Samuel did what the LORD said. When he arrived at Bethlehem, the elders of the town trembled when they met him. They asked, "Do you come in peace?"

⁵Samuel replied, "Yes, in peace; I have come to sacrifice to the LORD. Consecrate yourselves and come to the sacrifice with me." Then he consecrated Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

⁶When they arrived, Samuel saw Eliab and thought, "Surely the LORD's anointed stands here before the LORD."

⁷But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."

⁸Then Jesse called Abinadab and had him pass in front of Samuel. But Samuel said, "The LORD has not chosen this one either." ⁹Jesse then had Shammah pass by, but Samuel said, "Nor has the LORD chosen this one." ¹⁰Jesse had seven of his sons pass before Samuel, but Samuel said to him, "The LORD has not chosen these." ¹¹So he asked Jesse, "Are these all the sons you have?"

"There is still the youngest," Jesse answered. "He is tending the sheep."

Samuel said, "Send for him; we will not sit down until he arrives."

¹²So he sent for him and had him brought in. He was glowing with health and had a fine appearance and handsome features.

Then the LORD said, "Rise and anoint him; this is the one."

¹³So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers, and from that day on the Spirit of the LORD came powerfully upon David. Samuel then went to Ramah.

1 Samuel 16:1, 4-13

A Difficult Task

The key verse from our text is verse 7: “The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.”

Of all the choices we have to make in life, among the most important and most difficult are those we must make regarding **people**. We cannot avoid the necessity in many crucial situations of having to make judgments or evaluations of others. We have to do the best we can at determining another human being’s abilities, talents, competence, values and character.

And unlike automobiles (which we can take for a test drive) and medicines (which we can test in a laboratory and in clinical trials), humans are very tricky and hard to judge accurately. There are several reasons for this:

1. We always have limited data about another person. We know the things they choose to show and tell us, but there is always a hidden part to everyone.
2. We can’t see inside another person’s mind, soul, self-esteem, moral values and conscience to know what really makes them tick.
3. We can’t see into the future, to know with certainty what decisions or actions they will make in the situations that come to them.

Because of these limitations, we can understand and relate to Samuel who, in our scripture text for today, almost made a big mistake before he listened to the Lord. And we all should humbly admit that **we’re** not perfect or infallible either when it comes to making judgments and decisions. Think of all the arenas in which it’s necessary to evaluate other people and choose among them.

In the world of sports: decisions have to be made by those who put together and coach teams. The NFL football teams held their annual

“draft” soon, selecting players from the colleges. Only when training camp opens in the summer will we begin to see which players chosen will turn out to be All-Pros, and which will be busts. Until then, it’s all guesswork—because coaches and general managers can’t see inside the minds and hearts of athletes to know what they’re really like.

On an intimate personal level, single men and women make choices about a life partner. This is one of the most profound and critical decisions we will ever make. Choose a spouse wisely and your life will be happy and enriched; choose poorly and there is hell to pay.

Many of us in our professional lives have or will face the dilemma of hiring people to work for us or for our company. In spite of all the expensive “head-hunters” and vocational testing resources available to make the process more accurate, there’s always a gamble or risk of failure when a person is hired.

With our most precious assets of our lives—our bodies, our homes, our wealth—we have to make decisions regarding whom we will trust. We choose doctors, lawyers, realtors, accountants, and investment advisers. We have to trust them because they have more expertise than we do. But sometimes people have made the wrong choice, and been burned terribly by a professional they trusted. The only way to prevent any risk of disappointment is to never trust anyone. But then you’re faced with the impossible task of being your own doctor and dentist and so on—and I don’t recommend that.

A democratic nation has to make the critically important decision about who will serve as its President and Vice-President. And our campaigns make it notoriously difficult to really know the candidates inside, for their advisers and managers are experts at “spin” and public image. But the right or wrong leader makes all the difference.

Even in the most vital realm of all—the spiritual—it is necessary for us to make choices that will determine our eternal destiny. In whom will I place my faith and hope? Will it be Jesus of Nazareth to whom I surrender my heart? Or Mohammed, or Buddha? Or will I trust in

myself and my own moral virtue as sufficient to get me to heaven? It's an important decision indeed!

Some have tried to argue that the best way out of the maze of choices and judgments we face is to never judge. But that's actually impossible. A person might object to what I'm saying today by quoting Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: "The Bible says 'Do not judge, lest you too be judged.'" Yes, that is what Jesus told us should be the governing principle in our personal relationships with others. None of us has the right to presume to be God and judge another person's eternal soul and destination. And because none of us is perfect, we must be very careful in not criticizing others improperly or unfairly. Compassion, humility and a recognition of our own fallibility and imperfections must prevail in a Christian's relationship with others.

Samuel's Task

But the statement "Do not judge" cannot be applied to every situation—for there are clearly times when we are called by God to make a wise and sound judgment or decision, just as Samuel was.

Let's return to the dilemma our friend Sam faced. The reason why he had to undertake such a difficult task of selecting a new king for the nation of Israel was that their current chief executive, King Saul, had destroyed his credibility. His integrity had been compromised. He had very publicly disobeyed God's will and had attempted a naked power grab. And the Lord rightly declared that Saul's days were numbered.

What happens when a person's credibility is lost? It's very difficult, if not humanly impossible, to restore it. The news is regularly filled with shameful accounts of white collar criminals who abused the public trust. Investment advisers have persuaded their clients to invest their retirement funds in stock they knew was overvalued, because their firm was promoting the company or because they could make a fat commission. Major corporations have been exposed as having lied about their financial condition for years. News media

have been caught tainting the facts and demonstrating a political bias. It even happens in churches: leaders caught with their hands in the till or in an inappropriate relationship. Over and over, day after day, the newscasts show tragic examples of people sacrificing their credibility. That's what happened to King Saul.

And so Samuel has to do a job he wished he didn't have to do. When he got to Jesse's home in Bethlehem, he was treated like the guest of honor at a big feast. And the host trotted out for Samuel's inspection his oldest son, Eliab. What a specimen: big, strong, strapping—every bit the image of a king, in Samuel's eyes. But before he could offer him the job, the Lord whispered in the prophet's conscience, "Not so fast! He's not the one." Then God spoke these powerful words: "The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." What does that mean? It means that God sees beneath the surface facade or image we try to project. In scripture the word "heart" does not refer to that organ in our chest that circulates our blood. It refers to the inner person. The English words "character," "personality," "will" and "values" likewise express something of what the Bible calls "the heart."

Wise Decision-Making

When we face the important decisions and judgments and choices of life, it is vital for Christians to realize that the natural, human and worldly way of deciding is not always the wisest and best course. God sees things through heavenly values, not earthly values. And in nearly every area of life, the inner qualities of a person are the most important.

The best person for a job may not be the one with the glitziest resume. The best wife and lover is not necessarily the most physically endowed woman; and the best husband and provider is not necessarily the one with the highest income (look at the disastrous rate of failure of marriages in Hollywood, among the rich and beautiful). The most faithful friend is not necessarily the one with the highest social standing. Appearances can deceive. "People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart."

Though at times we all fall prey to the worst parts of our sinful nature—impatience, stubbornness, rebellion, greed, lust, and all the rest—nevertheless, deep inside we know that our lives will really be happier and more fulfilled if we make the right and wise choices. Wrong choices have a way of sticking to us like gum on the sole of our shoes—they can be very hard to get rid of or escape.

If we understand the importance of making the right, wise decisions in life, then let me close by identifying a few practical principles to help Christians find their way to wise choices. There are three truths that I want to leave with you.

1. The importance of prayer

By this I mean dialoguing with God—not just **talking** to the Lord, but learning to **listen** to God’s voice, as well. This is modeled for us by Samuel. If he hadn’t been listening to God, he would have made the wrong choice. Sometimes God speaks to us as we study His Word. Sometimes He speaks to us through the inner voice of our conscience, causing us to have doubts when we’re headed the wrong way, or giving us a sense of peace and reassurance when we’re leaning towards the right choice. Praying in an attitude of surrender to God’s will and listening for His guidance is the exact opposite of the kind of superficial prayer that simply asks God to ratify and bless what we’ve already decided. Real prayer involves submission to Him and a willingness to obey Him.

2. The importance of looking at the right things.

We are so easily blinded or misled by the wrong things (as Samuel almost was when he saw David’s oldest brother). There are times when good looks, or a loaded resume, or a slick sales pitch can blind us. But the Lord tells us to be sure to “look at the heart.” Character and integrity are the most crucial factors, and in the long run those will always make a difference.

Past performance is also a good indication. Stockbrokers are required in their advertising to issue the caution, “Past performance is no guarantee of future performance.” And that may be so on the big

roulette wheel of the stock market. But with people, their past actions and character are usually a good guide to what they'll do in the future. Be very careful, if you're a teenager or a single man or woman, to never date or marry someone because you think you can change them or rescue them; millions of abused women and children and spouses of alcoholics bear testimony to how fruitless that quest can be. And be very careful in your work life to never hire a person in the hopes that they'll learn responsibility and integrity on the job. You're likely to be disappointed.

3. The importance of wise counsel.

Proverbs 15 says "Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed." None of us has a perfect, infallible, unerring ability to make decisions without any mistakes. We will always be better if we listen to the wisdom and perspective of others. A church is always stronger if its pastor listens to its elders. This may come as a shock to teens, but your parents are not always totally out-of-it, and clueless; sometimes they actually can see things in your friends that you're blind to, and you ought to listen to them. Talking with a marriage counselor if you and your spouse are struggling can help you see things you've completely missed. Discussing with a friend a job offer before you say "yes" or "no" can help you make the right choice.

These are three ways in which we can grow towards wisdom as a Christian. The decisions and judgments we make are vitally important. God wants us to do what is right, to succeed in all ways in life. Let's commit ourselves to carefully following His path and seeking His wisdom at all times.

Will any of us make perfect decisions at every intersection of our lives? Not likely. Life is complicated, and sometimes we do our best and still make mistakes. But I am so thankful that the Lord is near each of us, and that if we turn to Him He offers His wisdom and help to make the best decisions we can. ■