

DEALING WITH DIFFICULT DECISIONS

Mark 14:32-50

For most of us, one of the main things that cause stress in our lives is making decisions. It can be overwhelming at times. The stress that comes with making decisions can even impact our physical health in addition to the emotional damage it can do. Why do you think that it is so difficult to make decisions? My initial thought was that “uncertainty” or fear of the unknown is a major cause for the stress that comes with decision making. We hear the term “unintended consequences” used to express concerns about the uncertainty of the outcome of decisions that are made.

When we make decisions, we try to consider such things as how the outcome will affect our success in life and how the actions and results fit into our priorities. We may go through some sort of process to come up with a logical choice and even if there was not a lot of uncertainty, we could still have stress associated with making the decision.

What would you do if there is something that you know you really ought to do, but this particular thing is just so inconvenient and so costly? No one is going to make you do it; however, it really needs to be done and you are the only one who can do the job. People face such challenges in their lives from time to time. An example that we hear about occasionally is that of a person donating a kidney to someone who has experienced kidney failure. If you were doing this for a close family member then the “decision” might be the obvious choice, but the stress would still be there because of all that you would have to endure to follow through with the decision.

As the time approached for the culmination of the earthly ministry of Jesus, He experienced major stresses that exceeded what most of us will ever have to go through. We can learn from what Jesus did during this time. In the account given to us in the latter part of the fourteenth chapter of Mark we see that prayer was an important part of the process, knowing God’s will was critical to making the right decision, being committed to doing God’s will and then actually doing what was decided were significant factors in all that He did.

The Need for Prayer in Decisions (14:32-35)

³² They came to a place named Gethsemane; and He said to His disciples, “**Sit here until I have prayed.**” ³³ And He took with Him Peter and James and John, and began to be very distressed and troubled. ³⁴ And He said to them, “**My soul is deeply grieved to the point of death; remain here and keep watch.**” ³⁵ And He went a little beyond *them*, and fell to the ground and *began* to pray that if it were possible, the hour might pass Him by. Mark 14:32-35 (NASB95)

The Passover meal had ended, Judas had left to carry out the betrayal, and Jesus had shared with His disciples critical teaching about the coming of the Holy Spirit and the ministry of the Spirit in the life of the believers. Jesus then prayed a prayer for Himself and the disciples and for the church. Following this, Jesus and the eleven disciples made their way toward the Garden of Gethsemane. John wrote that they crossed over the brook Kidron to get to the grove of olive trees.

Jesus left eight of the disciples with instructions to wait and took Peter, James and John further into the garden area with Him. These three had witnessed the Transfiguration and they had also been with Jesus when the daughter of Jarius was brought back to life. We can speculate that these three were more spiritually sensitive and perhaps had shown a greater understanding of what Jesus had been teaching them for the past three years.

What can we learn from what we see in these verses with regard to dealing with difficult decisions and the accompanying stress? First, all of us have friends and family that are close to us and it is good to have them around during such times. These people provide encouragement

or moral support and also a sense of accountability. We need to realize that encouragement and the sense of accountability can be helpful, but they are not sufficient and they have to be evaluated in light other factors. For example, when wrestling with a tough decision, we need to be able to discern between encouragement and escapism. Sometimes those who are close to you would give you advice to take the easy way out and to avoid the potential suffering or sacrifice that would come from making the right choice. With regard to accountability, we may make a decision that will minimize the pain and suffering of our friends and family in the short term but would be ultimately bad for them and perhaps others in the longer term. We can also find ourselves making a decision that is good for those close to us but disastrous for our own personal well being.

We also see that in our circle of friends and family, there are multiple circles and some people are closer and more trusted than others. Jesus left eight of the disciples near the entrance to garden and the instruction He gave them was to just “be there.” We can relate to this when we think about someone we know who may be having surgery. We may go to the hospital to be with the family. In situations like this, “being there” can be important. You may not be close enough to the family that you would be part of the group that would meet with the surgeon when he comes out to give the family an update; however, being there does help. On the other hand, Peter, James and John were closer to Jesus and He shared with them what He was struggling with at that time.

Notice the sequence of what was happening. When Jesus was alone with the three close disciples, something changed in His mood or emotions. We are told that He “began” to be distressed, amazed, troubled, and weighed down. Why did it just start then? The answer lies in the complexity of our emotional makeup. Within the various circle of acquaintances we have, we interact emotionally with the various circles in different ways. The more complex the society or culture, the larger the number of different circles we may have. The way you relate to and what you would be willing to share with the general public is different from what you might share with those in your church. What you share with your church is different from what you might share with those in your Sunday School class or small group. What you share with your small group is different from what you might share with your best friend. We don’t typically notice these differences in the normal everyday happenings. However, when there is a crisis such as a death in the family, then the differences become more apparent.

Sometime ago (more than 30 years), one of my brothers-in-law died unexpectedly of a heart attack as a result of physical overexertion. I saw this difference in the way people interact with those in various circles when I went back to Louisiana for the funeral. As I entered the room where my sister was talking with various people, I noticed that she was doing quite well. People in the community and those with whom my brother-in-law worked were visiting and she was exchanging pleasantries with them as people normally do during such situations. When she saw me and we walked toward each other, she lost her composure and starting weeping. She had the freedom with me to let go of the pent up emotions that she had been concealing up to that point. After hurricane Katrina had struck the Gulf Coast area, Nancy and I went to Louisiana to help another sister with the damage that had happen to her home. That Sunday (about one week after the hurricane struck) we went to church there and the pastor had a sermon about how people were handling the emotional trauma that accompanied the losses they had experienced. He pointed out that we approach such things with what the British call a “stiff upper lip.” We are able to maintain that air of composure until we encounter another person who is very close to us and whom we sense loves us. It is at that point that we really share what’s going on down deep inside of us. Everyone there could relate to what he was describing.

We read of this same normal human response that Jesus had. When He was alone with

Peter, James, and John He told them He was “grieved to the point of death.” He instructed them to stay where they were and to watch or stay alert. Jesus then went on a little further and drew into the deepest inner circle He had. At this point He was communing with the Father and His real feelings that He could not share with anyone else came out. He was essentially saying, “If there is any other way, let’s take the alternative route.” (When you draw into your smallest inner circle, whom do you find there with you?)

Knowing God’s Will (14:36-39)

³⁶ And He was saying, “Abba! Father! All things are possible for You; remove this cup from Me; yet not what I will, but what You will.” ³⁷ And He came and found them sleeping, and said to Peter, “Simon, are you asleep? Could you not keep watch for one hour?” ³⁸ “Keep watching and praying that you may not come into temptation; the spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.” ³⁹ Again He went away and prayed, saying the same words. Mark 14:36-39 (NASB95)

Notice how Jesus (God, the Son) addressed Jehovah (God, the Father). It was in the intimate terms that a little child would approach an earthly father. The term “Abba” is the equivalent of Daddy or Papa. Just a little child believes that his daddy can do anything, Jesus knew that all power and authority come from God, the Father and He can do any. The uncertainty in Jesus’ prayer was not related to God’s ability to change the circumstances but it was a question of God’s willingness to change. Jesus knew the plan and knew what was going to happen if the plan was carried out. This prayer was a last minute check to see if there were any possible other way to accomplish the goal of making salvation available to mankind other than His suffering and death. There was no “plan B.”

We see here that Jesus was not locked into the plan, but he was locked into being in alignment with the Father’s will. Sometimes we get a plan or program in mind for accomplishing a particular goal and we become so dedicated to “the plan” that we may miss out on what God is doing. If we are considering our priorities, then we should have “doing things God’s way” as the top priority rather than just blind loyalty to a program that was effective some time ago.

While Jesus was engaged in prayer, the disciples who were asked to watch were sleeping. This situation must have been a disappointment for Jesus. However, He probably was not too surprised. The fact that mankind had failed to be faithful in almost every situation proves our need of salvation. Even today, Jesus finds His disciples, the Church, asleep and not watching. How many people really spend an hour a day in prayer or devotion. The consequence of not doing that is clearly spelled out here: we enter into temptation.

The continuing struggle that each of us faces each day is alluded to here by Jesus. The spirit and the flesh are contrary to each other. Paul discussed this struggle in the seventh chapter of Romans. *The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak* described not only what happened to the disciples as they fell asleep, but it also described the struggle that Jesus was undergoing. He wanted to do the job, the mission, that He came to do. On the other hand, He did not want to endure that intense suffering that was going to be on the cross. That is why He prayed, “let this cup pass from Me.”

Even though Jesus did not welcome the suffering in the realm of the body and soul, He was not willing to let the purpose of His earthly life go unfulfilled. As He prayed we see some insight that shows us the fact that some things will not go away but we can go through them and be done with them. Sometimes the best approach to problems is just to face up to them, attack them head-on and get it behind us. Most of the time, we practice avoidance because there is usually some sacrifice or suffering involved. Even after we come to the realization of the necessity of what must be done, we need to bathe that decision in prayer so that our resolve to do what we know must be done will not slip. We see Jesus coming to acceptance of the situation

and then going back to confirm what He had resolved to do.

Commit to Do God's Will (14:40-44)

⁴⁰ And again He came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were very heavy; and they did not know what to answer Him. ⁴¹ And He came the third time, and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? It is enough; the hour has come; behold, the Son of Man is being betrayed into the hands of sinners. ⁴² "Get up, let us be going; behold, the one who betrays Me is at hand!" ⁴³ Immediately while He was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, came up accompanied by a crowd with swords and clubs, *who were* from the chief priests and the scribes and the elders. ⁴⁴ Now he who was betraying Him had given them a signal, saying, "Whomever I kiss, He is the one; seize Him and lead Him away under guard." Mark 14:40-44 (NASB95)

Jesus had already prayed that He would do the will of the Father. Yet we see that He went back to pray several more times. Once the decision had been made to go with the original plan, then there was a need for more prayer. What would you think a person would be praying for after the decision has been made to do the "hard" thing or the more difficult option? The stress of knowing what was going to happen actually intensified at the point that the commitment was made. In Luke's account, he noted that Jesus was so stressed by the burden of the situation that His perspiration was like drops of blood.

This was it! There was no turning back now. The battle for men's souls was underway and Satan was going to be defeated by the plan God had laid out before the foundation of the world.

Follow Through on Commitment (14:45-50)

⁴⁵ After coming, Judas immediately went to Him, saying, "Rabbi!" and kissed Him. ⁴⁶ They laid hands on Him and seized Him. ⁴⁷ But one of those who stood by drew his sword, and struck the slave of the high priest and cut off his ear. ⁴⁸ And Jesus said to them, "Have you come out with swords and clubs to arrest Me, as you would against a robber?" ⁴⁹ "Every day I was with you in the temple teaching, and you did not seize Me; but *this has taken place to fulfill the Scriptures.*" ⁵⁰ And they all left Him and fled. Mark 14:45-50 (NASB95)

Judas led the group of temple authorities right up to where Jesus was and identified Him with a kiss. The disciples quickly figured out what was happening and they encountered the second major temptation for themselves that night. The previous temptation involved their physical comfort and this temptation was related to whether they would follow the way of the world or the way of the Kingdom of God. Unless we are challenged with difficulty, then we have little problem following God's way. The tests come in the challenges we face. The way of the world is to draw your sword when challenged. That is exactly what one of them did. We are told by John that Peter cut off the ear of the servant.

According to the account by Luke, Jesus's response was quick and it is advice that we all need to hear. He said "No more of this!" Those words need to be engraved on our minds: When it comes to the way of the world, no more of this.

Notice how Jesus continued to challenge those who came to arrest Him. He did not back away from the confrontation. He did not put up a battle against them and had been "available" to be arrested during that week. He was not a thief or a dangerous criminal, yet, they approached Him as such. They needed the power of "darkness" to be able to do their deed.

It is amazing that these people were so close to the "Light of the World," yet they chose darkness rather than light.

It is our responsibility to show the Light to the world. You see, many others would choose the light if they could just see the light. They need a good real-life example. We need to be that example in our sphere of influence. We must let our light so shine that others may see our good works and glorify our Father in Heaven.