LIVING WORD BOOKS

MENSA OTABIL



HOW TO MAKE WISE DECISIONS

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The way of a fool is right in his own eyes: but he that hearkeneth unto counsel is wise.

P roverbs 12:15

INTRODUCTION

Life is full of decisions. It is said that the average person makes thousands of decisions every day. These range from routine ones that are repetitive and often inconsequential to major decisions that have long-lasting implications for our lives and those of other people.

Many of the important decisions we have to make in life require careful thought and consideration of many issues and therefore receiving good advice can be very helpful. Making quality decisions often requires the help of people around us. Almost everyone receives advice from somebody. People rely on friends, colleagues, parents, siblings, counsellors, pastors, mentors and many others for advice or help in making major decisions.

Receiving good advice is an art that can be perfected by practice. It does not come naturally but can be carefully learnt. There are people whose lives have been enriched by the quality of decisions they have made based on the good advice they received from others.

The quality of our lives is therefore influenced by the people from whom we receive advice. For every one of us, there are people who enrich our lives and others who deplete our lives because of the quality of advice they give to us

In order to advance in life, you need to examine the quality of people you receive advice from and determine to consistently heed the good rather than the bad advice. Even when you receive both good and bad advice concerning a particular issue, it should be possible to know which one to heed. That ability to discern between god and bad counsel is what this book seeks to build in you.

How to Make Wise Decisions presents a systematic and yet simple approach that involves six key steps to receiving good advice and making quality decisions which will help you advance in life.

Step #1

Consider Your Own Limitations

You don't know everything; neither can you know everything. You cannot live long enough to know everything. There will always be things you are not fully informed of. Even if you have lived to a ripe old age like Methuselah, there is bound to be an experience you may not have had because of some limitation you may have.

Each of us needs advice in making decisions because of our limitations. We are limited in various ways:

a. **Our understanding.** We don't always have a full understanding of everything. 'For we know in part and we prophesy (understand in part…' (1 Corinthians 13:9). Even as a pastor, there are certain Bible verses that leave me confused and bewildered. Sometimes, I am only able to unravel them after years of pondering and meditation. The realization that I don't know it all can be very humbling.

b. **Our experience.** You have not gone through every situation and so you cannot appreciate the full dynamics of everything. No matter how much you appreciate something from an outside perspective there are aspects of it that someone with experience can bring to your attention. Your life can therefore be enriched when you receive advice from them.

c. **Our competence.** Each of us is different in the things we have competence in and know how to do. You may have a different kind of education or orientation, which may prevent you from being specialized in a particular subject. Carpenters and nurses do not have the same level of competence. A carpenter cannot use his tools to cure himself when he gets ill; neither may a nurse be able to put wood together to craft a piece of furniture.

For by wise counsel you will wage your own war, and in a multitude of counselors there is safety.

Proverbs 24:6

Step #2

Choose Wise Counsellors

Counsellors help you to see a better picture of the situation you are dealing with. Every counsellor in your life is a medium by which you see that side3 of yourself which is usually hidden. Safety in life is often guaranteed when we are able to make informed or wise decisions based on a variety of perspectives. That is why the Bible recommends having a multitude of counsellors.

Each of us has a blind spot that we cannot see by ourselves and by receiving counsel from different angles we are able to see the perspectives that would otherwise have been hidden from us. In that regard, counsellors are like mirrors. Driving to church one morning I saw this huge truck ahead of me, stuck right in the middle of the road, so I had no option but to swerve to the next lane. After quickly scanning both rear view mirrors, I made my move. However, just then a car 'appeared' behind me that I did not see at first because it appeared from an angle from which my mirrors could not capture it—a blind spot. Fortunately for me nothing untoward happened.

I had checked before moving but I didn't see the potential danger, a situation that might have been averted if the car had a number of mirrors. That is why the Bible says in a multitude of 'mirrors' (counsellors) there is safety. Each one of them reflects something in your life and the more of them you have the more likely you are to perceive every angle.

It is almost easy to predict the advice you will receive from each of the people around you when faced with a particular problem. For instance, a person seeking to walk out of. A troubled marriage may be able to predict what form of counsel will originate from parents, siblings or best friends. The counsel he or she may receive from the pastor, lawyer or colleagues in the office may all be different but each may help expose different angles of the same problem to help them make the decision. It is often unwise to take such important decisions based on the opinion of just one counsellor. You may need several of them to critically assess the situation at hand.

So who is the ideal counsellor to look out for?

a. **Good character.** A good counsellor must have a good character. A person seeking counsel because her husband is contemplating marrying another woman should know what to expect when she seeks counsel from her father who is polygamous or having extra-marital affairs. He is likely to ask her to take it in good faith because that is how men are. It is obvious that such advice would be heavily tainted by the deficiencies in relationship.

b. **Practical wisdom.** A counsellor must have a proven track record of success or experience in the area you are seeking help in. I may be good at my job as a preacher but I may require the help of experts in areas like law, architecture, finance and investment if I want to make progress in those fields.

c. **Ability to keep secrets.** A good counsellor must be able to keep secrets. A person seeking counsel is required to open up the counsellor to help them give good counsel based on honest information. The counselee must have the confidence that whatever he or she is sharing with the counsellor shall remain confidential. The first sign of a counsellor you should not open up to is someone who uses other people's stories. If a counsellor refers, with personal details, to problems he or she has solved for other people, know that your example would also be shared with others.

A story is told of three pastors who had faced a life-threatening situation on board the ship they were travelling in, and who decided to confess to each other about their personal weaknesses. The first confess to having a lust for women and narrated all the things he had ever engaged in, after which he heaved a huge sigh of relief. The second confessed to being a terrible kleptomaniac; he confessed to stealing from everyone including his own family and congregation, after which he also let out a sigh.

A long silence ensued during which the last one kept shaking his head. He then confessed that he was a terrible gossip; he loved telling exaggerated stories about people and could hardly keep any secrets. The implication naturally sent chills through the other two as they pondered over the consequences of his statement. That is what happens when you confide in a counsellor who cannot keep things confidential.

There are many plans in a man's heart,
Nevertheless the Lord's counsel—that will stand.

Proverbs 19:21

Step #3

Commit all Advice to God

Good advice is not necessarily divine counsel, You need God's approval because there are instances when many people can advise you to do the wrong thing. The majority is not always right. That is why people vote for governments by a wide majority and regret because later, the decision proves to be wrong. The saying that "the voice of the people is the voice of God" cannot be3 farther from the truth. The Scriptures are replete with instances where all the people erred and only one prophet like Elijah or Isaiah stood against the masses.

Anyone listening to a multitude of counsellors is likely to end up with different alternative solutions. It is, therefore, important to commit all advice to God for divine guidance to make the right decision.

It is often easy to make a choice between good and evil. In such cases, even when you are strongly tempted, you have no doubt about what is right or what God would have you do. However, when faced with equally attractive alternatives, you need divine discernment in order to make the right choices and decisions.

> *He went a little farther and fell on His face, and prayed, saying, "O My Father, if it is possible let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You Will.*
> Matthew 26:39

If you are not ready to submit to the will of God, don't pray! You commit all options to God in order to receive the ability to discern because sometimes in the multitude of counsellors there could be confusion; and you may not be able to tell the future outcome of any decision you make. Faced with many seemingly-good alternatives, the kind of insight that helps you to choose rightly can only come by discernment!

Step #4

Count the Cost of Your Choices

The next step in making wise decisions is to count the cost of your choices. Every decision has its consequences; every cause has its effects and every action has a reaction. For every choice you want to make, it is important to ask yourself whether you are ready to live with the impact of the decisions you make.

In order into walk in wisdom or godly counsel, you need to examine the long-term implications of every choice before making it. Some decisions look attractive in the short-term but turn out to have damaging consequences in the long-term. When King David committed adultery and took Bathsheba into his bed, he was obviously looking at immediate pleasure rather than long-term consequences. Even though God forgave him when he repented, he still suffered the long-term consequences of his actions including the death of his child, problems in the family and, probably more importantly, the loss of God's promise of a perpetual kingdom for his descendants.

Life's decisions are not made in isolation. Every decision we make has several other linkages that ought to be considered. Today, someone may be happy with an ill-considered decision they may have made in solving a particular problem. However, when the dust settles, their descendants may rise up to curse them for the wrong choices they made and their attendant implications.

Sometimes you may be tempted to go with a convenient option and think you have solved a current problem, but the impact of your decision may outlive you, for several years.

If Abraham knew that the counsel of his wife Sarah would lead to a problem the world would still be contending with in 2006, he probably would have said, 'Sarah, that is very nice of you, you are the most generous woman I know but this is bad advice because thousands of years from now, this decision will continue to cause problems for mankind.'

There is, therefore, the need for careful consideration at every stage in life in

order to make the right choice and walk in godly counsel.

Step #5

Carry Out Your Decisions

After receiving counsel from a multitude, committing them to God and counting the cost of your choices, it is time to act. Some people remain at the consideration stage and keep counting the cost without making a choice to act responsibly and courageously.

Such people keep shuttling back and forth with every decision and whenever they seem to have concluded things they introduce new dimensions into the equation. Sometimes, these delays result in lost opportunities. A young lady about to accept a well-considered proposal from a prospective suitor may keep deferring her decision because someone asks one flimsy question or another whenever she seems to be ready. However, if she delays infinitely, she may end up with a situation where the young man moves on and gets married to someone else.

Doors of opportunity do not remain open forever.

Therefore, after you have carefully and prayerfully considered your decision, carry it out. In order to do that you must:

a. Act responsibly. When we receive good advice and decide to make a particular choice, we must take responsibility for that choice. Sometimes, the choice may not look popular or acceptable in certain quarters but you must take a stand for what you believe in.

b. Act courageously. It takes courage to take a decision or make a choice among the various alternatives open to us. Sometimes, the fear or reality is that choosing one means losing the other altogether. If you have two equally attractive but different job offers at the same time, choosing one could mean saying goodbye to the other opportunity forever. However, in spite of your fears, you still have to make a decision and it takes courage to do that.

c. Act wisely. Wisdom is a crucial element in carrying out your choice. You need to deal wisely with offers you are rejecting. You also need wisdom even in implementing the choice you have made in order to get the best results. In making long-term decisions it is helpful to act wisely and with careful consideration rather than on emotional considerations only

“Woe to the rebellious children,” says the Lord,
“Who take counsel, but not of Me,
And who [a]devise plans, but not of My Spirit,
That they may add sin to sin;

Who walk to go down to Egypt,
And have not asked My advice,
To strengthen themselves in the strength of Pharaoh,
And to trust in the shadow of Egypt!

Isaiah 30:1-2

Step #6

Commend Your Ways to God

After you have made a choice, you have to live with the consequences and, to do that, you have to commit things to God and trust in Him to guide you through the decisions you make. Sometimes, after all the careful and prayerful consideration, you may feel you have made a wrong choice or mistake.

It could be because you have received new information that introduces a new dimension into the entire equation. There have been instances where a man marries a woman only to realise afterwards that she is a divorcee and had kept it from him all along. Similarly, a young bride expecting her first child could find out to her horror that her husband is at the same time expecting another child through an adulterous relationship.

It could also be because you have seen the light and realised that you were wrong about the choice you made. There have been instances where people have walked out of a good job for another one or travelled abroad for a better life only to realise they were totally wrong in the first place.

Sometimes, it is just a case of fear. After making a choice, one can be filled with fear because of the uncertainties of life. In order to overcome these challenges, arising from our decisions and choices, we must:

a. **Live by faith** . You have to come to terms with the decisions you make, even when you make mistakes. You need to have an optimistic outlook about the future and hope for the best. In some cases, you cannot reverse the decision easily but God's grace is able to turn what looks like a hopeless situation around for your good.

b. **Trust God for the best.** Live a day at a time, trusting God to guide you to make your decision work. Some of the decisions you take may be major because they may affect your future, e.g. whom you decide to marry, your career or which country you settle in.

Your decisions sometimes involve your children - what schools they attend and whom they could choose to be their friends; you may guide them into choosing the right careers even if they do not choose exactly what you wish. Although you do your bit, you cannot tell whether your decisions are right or wrong; but you can trust God to order your steps and make the crooked paths straight. Even if you realise you have made a mistake, trust him to take care of things for you.

I trust that you'd be able to follow these steps of wise decision-making so you don't hastily make important choices out of fear, anger, frustration or anxiety. Instead, always bring God into the picture because He is the One who will guide you into the great future you have always desired.

Shalom.