

The Choices We Make



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Eph. 1:1–4; Matt. 22:35–37; 7:24, 25; Prov. 18:24; 1 Cor. 15:33; Eccles. 2:1–11.*

Memory Text: “And if it seems evil to you to serve the LORD, choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods which your fathers served that were on the other side of the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you dwell. But as for me and my house, we will serve the LORD” (*Joshua 24:15, NKJV*).

Ever notice that life is full of choices? In fact, one could argue that in many ways, what we do all day, from the moment we get up until we go to bed, is make choices. We make so many choices that often we don't even think about them. We just make them.

Some choices are simple and even become routine, while others are life-changing and have eternal consequences, not only for us but even for our own families.

Hence, how crucial that we think through our choices, especially the big ones, the ones that can impact us and our families for the rest of not only our own lives but our family members' lives, as well.

How many of us, to this day, regret choices we have made? How many, to this day, live with the wreckage from wrong choices made long ago? Fortunately, there is forgiveness. There is redemption, and there is healing, even for the worst of decisions.

This week, we will look in a very broad way at the question of the choices we make, how we should make them, and what impact these choices can have on ourselves and our families.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 13.

Free Will, Free Choice

Some Christians believe that God has chosen, even before a person was born, whether or not that person will be saved. That is, those who in the end are lost eternally are lost because God, in His wisdom (this theology claims), made that choice for this person to be lost. Which means, then, that regardless of their choices, that person will be condemned.

Fortunately, as Seventh-day Adventists, we don't ascribe to that theology. Instead, we believe that God has chosen for all of us to be saved—and that even before the world began, we were chosen in Him to have eternal life.

Read Ephesians 1:1–4; Titus 1:1, 2; and 2 Timothy 1:8, 9. What do these verses tell us about being chosen by God and when we were chosen?

However good this news, some people will still be lost (*Matt. 25:41*). And that's because, though God has chosen us all, He has given humans a most sacred gift, and that is free will, free choice.

What does Matthew 22:35–37 teach about free will?

The Lord does not force us to love Him. Love, in order to be love, has to be freely given. In many ways, one could argue that the Bible is the story of God reaching out to lost human beings and seeking, without coercion, to win their hearts to Himself. This reality can best be seen in the life and ministry of Jesus, and how people—using their free will—reacted to Him. Some were drawn to Him; others wanted Him dead.

Yes, God has chosen us for salvation, but, in the end, we have to make the choice to accept that salvation. There is no question that of all the choices we have to make, the choice to serve the Lord is, by far, the most consequential for us and for those who are impacted (such as our immediate family) by our life and the choices that we make in it.

Making the Right Choices

We all know very well the importance of the choices we make. And we all know, too, how wrong choices can very negatively impact our lives and the lives of others. The question is, *How can we know how to make the right choices?*

The following verses give us some general steps that can help us in our quest to make the right decisions. What are these steps?

1. 1 Thess. 5:17, James 1:5 _____

2. Isa. 1:19; Matt. 7:24, 25 _____

3. Ps. 119:105, 2 Tim. 3:16 _____

4. Prov. 3:5, 6; Isa. 58:11 _____

5. Prov. 15:22, 24:6 _____

In every important decision we make, how crucial that we go to the Lord in prayer, that we make sure our choice will not lead us to violate God's law in any way—or even the principles in His Word. How crucial that we trust in God, that we surrender our choice to Him; that is, we must pray that the choices we make will glorify Him and that we are ready to surrender our own desires if they go against His plan for our lives. Many times, too, wise counselors can be a great help as we seek to make choices. In the end, we can have great assurance knowing that God loves and wants what's best for us, and that if we in faith and humility surrender our lives to Him, we can move ahead in faith on the choices we make.

How do you go about making big choices in your life? What, if any, spiritual steps do you take in seeking to make these choices?

Choosing Friends

One of the most important choices we'll ever make is our friends. Most of the time we don't set out to make friends; often friendships simply develop naturally as we spend time with people who enjoy some of the same things we do.

What principles in choosing friends do we find in the following verses?

Prov. 12:26; 17:17; 18:24; 22:24, 25.

Proverbs 18:24 says that if we want to have friends, we must be friendly. Sometimes people find themselves alone, but their morose, negative attitude is what drives others away. "Even the best of us have these unlovely traits; and in selecting friends we should choose those who will not be driven away from us when they learn that we are not perfect. Mutual forbearance is called for. We should love and respect one another notwithstanding the faults and imperfections that we cannot help seeing; for this is the Spirit of Christ. Humility and self-distrust should be cultivated, and a patient tenderness with the faults of others. This will kill out all narrowing selfishness and make us large-hearted and generous."—Ellen G. White, *Pastoral Ministry*, p. 95.

One of the best-known stories of friendship is that between David and Jonathan. Had Saul, Israel's first king and Jonathan's father, been faithful and obedient, his kingdom might have lasted for several generations, and Jonathan could have been the successor to his throne. When Saul proved unworthy of his call, God chose David as the new king of Israel, thus disqualifying Jonathan for what otherwise should have been rightfully his. Here we have a powerful example of how the wrong choices of one family member (Saul) impacted another family member (Jonathan).

But Jonathan was not angry or jealous of David. Instead, he chose to help David by protecting him from the anger of his own father, Saul. "The soul of Jonathan was knit to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul" (*1 Sam. 18:1, NKJV*). What a powerful example of true friendship.

"Do not be deceived: 'Evil company corrupts good habits' " (*1 Cor. 15:33, NKJV*). What has been your own experience with friends, even those who might have meant you no harm but who ended up harming you anyway? How can wrong choices in friendships hurt family relationships?

Choosing a Life Partner

If you're supposed to choose your friends carefully, you must be even more careful when it comes to choosing your future spouse. Adam was very blessed that God designed his life companion with His own hands and from within himself. Adam's choice was easy since Eve was not just the only woman, but the perfect woman. The rest of us have a more difficult time, since none of us is perfect and we have many more people to choose from.

Because this decision is so important, God has not left us without guidance in this area of our lives. Besides all the important steps we looked at in Monday's study, there are some more specific steps to follow in considering the question of marriage (we will look at the whole question of marriage more carefully in lesson 6). Indeed, outside of the choice to serve the Lord, the question of a spouse will almost always be the most consequential choice anyone makes in their lives.

What very general guidance is found in the following texts that could and should be applied to someone seeking the right partner in marriage? *Ps. 37:27, Ps. 119:97, 1 Cor. 15:33, James 1:23–25.*

Besides looking for the right person to marry, be the right person first. “ ‘Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets’ ” (*Matt. 7:12, NKJV*). Someone could find a great potential spouse who has all the qualities one would want, but if the one who wants good qualities in the other lacks them himself or herself, problems will arise.

This is not new—and is certainly seen not only in marriage but in life in general. Paul spends a great deal of time in the opening of Romans talking to those who condemn others for doing what they, the ones condemning, also are guilty of. Or, as Jesus said: “ ‘And why do you look at the speck in your brother's eye, but do not consider the plank in your own eye?’ ” (*Matt. 7:3, NKJV*).

How often do you find yourself wishing others (your spouse, perhaps) had traits that, in fact, you lack yourself? Think about it.

Choosing a Course

At some point, we have to make the choice about what we want to do with our lives in terms of a job or career. Unless independently wealthy or working full-time at home taking care of the house and family (the most noble of all occupations), many people have to choose a path as far as earning a living goes.

Of course, we all exist in certain circumstances that can, to a great degree, limit our choices regarding a career. But within whatever sphere we exist, we can make choices regarding our occupation that, especially in the context of knowing that we have salvation in Jesus Christ, can give our lives added meaning and purpose. In short, whatever we do, we can do for the glory of God.

What mistake did Solomon make, and how can we be careful not to do something similar? *Eccles. 2:1–11*.

We don't need to be rich to get caught up in the same trap that Solomon did. "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows" (*1 Tim. 6:10, NKJV*). One can be poor and love money just as much as someone does who is rich.

Yes, we need to earn a living, but regardless of what we do or how much we make, we need not make the pursuit of wealth an idol. Many families, too, have suffered because of a father who, obsessed with making money, neglected the family in order to try to get rich. How many children, or spouses, would have preferred a humbler lifestyle over an impoverished relationship with the father? In most cases, people would have preferred the former over the latter.

From Creation, God planned for work to be part of life (*Gen. 2:15*). The danger is when we make our work the center of our life, or it becomes a means of solely acquiring wealth for ourselves. This is the mistake Solomon made. He was searching for meaning in those projects, and even though many brought him a degree of satisfaction, at the end he figured out that they were meaningless.

Someone once asked: "How many people, at the end of their lives, wished they had spent more time in the office and less time with their family?" What's the important message in this question?

Further Thought: All through Scripture, we are confronted with the reality of human free will. Even the unfallen Adam and Eve (*Genesis 3*) had free will, and they unfortunately made the wrong choice with it. If unfallen beings, in perfection, could misuse free will, how much more so beings like us, steeped in sin?

And we need to remember that free will is just that, *free*, which means that regardless of the pressure on us, both from within and without, we don't have to choose what is wrong. We can, through the power of God in us, make the right choices with the free will God has given us. Thus, how important that we carefully weigh our decisions, especially thinking about how those decisions can impact our family lives. The freewill choice of Cain to kill his brother surely devastated his family. The freewill decision of Joseph's brothers to sell him into slavery ruined their father's life. "And he recognized it and said, 'It is my son's tunic. A wild beast has devoured him. Without doubt Joseph is torn to pieces.' Then Jacob tore his clothes, put sackcloth on his waist, and mourned for his son many days. And all his sons and all his daughters arose to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, and he said, 'For I shall go down into the grave to my son in mourning.' Thus his father wept for him" (*Gen. 37:33–35, NKJV*).

All through the Bible, as in life, we can find examples of how the free choices of family members, for good or evil, impact others, such as the choices of Korah, Dathan, and Abiram (*Num. 16:1–32; see also Dan. 6:23, 24; Gen. 18:19*).

Discussion Questions:

- 1 What are some of the free choices you made today? What do they tell you about yourself and your relationship with God and with others? Of the choices you made, which ones, if any, do you wish you had made differently?
- 2 What Bible characters made wrong choices, and what can we learn from their mistakes? How did their wrong choices negatively impact their families?
- 3 No question: we all have regrets about wrong choices we have made. Why, in times of those regrets, is the gospel such good news? What promises from the Bible have you claimed in times of distress and guilt over wrong choices?
- 4 If some people were to come to you talking about marriage, what advice would you give them, and why? What principles can you point to from the Word of God to help them work through this important decision?

Brazilian Dodges Bombs

By CAROLYN AZO

Dismayed by news reports of starving people in Africa, Marcelo Dornelles left a comfortable life in Brazil to provide ADRA relief in the war-torn countries of Mozambique, Angola, and Iraq.

Although only 48, Dornelles has white hair and a well-lined face that testify to years of arduous humanitarian work amid bomb explosions, intense sun, severe cold, and pounding rain.

He wouldn't change a thing.

"I was very dissatisfied in 1990, even though I had a comfortable life," Dornelles said in an interview in the Iraqi city of Erbil, where he worked as director of ADRA Kurdistan. "I felt a desire to help when I saw television images of people dying of hunger in Ethiopia and Somalia, where there was war at the time. I knew God was calling me."

His first assignment was to help the Adventist Development and Relief Agency establish food programs for people displaced by conflict and drought in 100 villages in Mozambique. The country had been mired in civil war since 1977, and a peace agreement would not be reached until 1992.

"When I arrived, I realized that the situation was more complicated than I had thought," Dornelles said. "But I could not turn back. Much help was needed."

He worked in Mozambique for eight months, and he said his desire to help others only grew stronger. But a medical emergency involving his mother prompted him to cut short his work and return to Brazil to care for her.

His next assignment, to Angola, brought him to a country in the midst of a 27-year civil war. His first years were horrific as he saw desperate people eat shoes and dead dogs. During a military offensive in 1993, he saved 20 children from starvation and bomb blasts by sheltering them in his home in the provincial capital of Malanje in northern Angola.

"What I saw in the streets was terrible, dozens of children who were only skin and bones dying of hunger," he said. "I could not bear such misery. So, I gathered the children whom I met, brought them to my house, and fed them."

He also worked with ADRA to place more than 200 orphaned children with Adventist families in Malanje.



In 2016, Dornelles moved to Iraq to help internally displaced people there. "He's a guy with a big heart," said Liander Reis, a Brazilian who works as chief financial officer for ADRA Kurdistan.

Part I: Overview

Choices are such a part of our lives that they often escape our direct attention. As a result, bad choices are made that result in bad consequences. Yet, those same choices are repeated time and time again. This lesson reflects briefly on the nature of choice, then studies how the significant choices of our lives can be made in a godly way.

When we speak of “choice,” we are generally referring to free choice. The single greatest creative gift God ever bestowed upon us was to make us free moral agents. Without this gift, all other gifts could not be freely appreciated. Without it, too, all our responses of love and worship to God would be gutted of authenticity. True freedom makes love a genuine possibility. But this freedom is not without the potential for evil. As we all know, that potential has actualized, again and again, since the Fall.

But though evil has metaphorically swallowed this planet in darkness, God has preserved and provided sources of light for us to help us find our way. Often, we try to shift responsibility to God’s doorstep for the problems and pain in our lives. In many cases, however, honest examination shows we have often ignored God’s resources for wisdom that would have prevented such problems in the first place. Our God is a God of revelation (and patience). He communicates with us through nature (*Ps. 19:1–3, Rom. 1:20*), prayer (*Matt. 21:22, James 1:5*), Scripture (*Ps. 119:105, 2 Tim. 3:16*), godly counselors (*Prov. 11:14, 15:22*), and, most gloriously, through the life and words of Jesus (*Heb. 1:2, 3*). These are our lights in the world. We really shouldn’t be making significant choices without consulting them—especially in the areas this lesson highlights: (1) choosing friends, (2) choosing a life partner, and (3) choosing a life occupation.

Part II: Commentary

Motivation for Christian Ethics

We are who we are because of our choices. We are where we are because of our choices. Of course, other people’s choices have affected our lives, because we live interdependently with one another; but how we have *responded* to those choices puts us back in the driver’s seat. This perspective keeps us responsible and accountable for our current situations, while at the same time it causes us to acknowledge that some events in life are not within our control. The life ramifications of our choices

are momentous. Thus, one would assume everyone invests considerable effort in reflecting on the morality of their choices and then, as a result, intentionally adopts the most reasonable ethical framework. But sadly, the average person spends more time researching which computer to buy rather than which ethical system to live by.

Convenience, cultural trends, peer pressure, emotions, habits, and mere preferences are unreliable guides for the choices that lead to the life that God intended for us. Basing our decisions on such unreliable foundations is foolishness. We are each compelled, whether we are Christians or not, to ask: What will be the bases for my decision-making?

Basis of Christian Ethics

The bedrock of Christian ethics is that we have been made in the *imago Dei* (i.e., the image of God [*Gen. 1:27*]). All of our decisions should be made in reference to that reality. The greater the knowledge of the character of God, the broader our ethical horizon becomes, and the more glorious our destiny appears (*2 Cor. 3:18*). So how can the image of God be preserved and restored on a choice-by-choice basis?

In answer to that question, consider the following apocryphal story. A man once asked Michelangelo about his statue of David. The man inquired, “How did you create such a masterpiece from a rough chunk of marble?” Michelangelo responded, “I simply chipped away everything that didn’t look like David.” We can make decisions to do only those things that look like Jesus and purpose to chip away from our lives anything that doesn’t. Being mindful of our call to be God’s image bearers is essential to the goal of Christian ethics. But we need more assistance and guidance than simply to be left asking ourselves, “What would Jesus do?”

The Source of Christian Ethics

The teachings of the Bible provide the foundations for Christian ethics. The late Adventist ethics scholar Miroslav Kiš provides us with three lenses that help us glean the ethical wisdom from the Scriptures (see Miroslav Kiš, “Biblical Narratives and Christian Decision,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 9, nos. 1, 2 [1998]: 24–31). These three lenses are: (1) principles, (2) rules of action, and (3) normative models. Because these lenses are relatively simple and there are only three of them, write them on a whiteboard, if available, and encourage your class to commit them to memory.

Principles: These are grounded in our fundamental notions of moral truth. They are general and immutable yet still need illumination from the Scriptures. The Ten Commandments, the Psalms, Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, the Gospels (especially the Sermon on the Mount), and the Epistles are generally considered sources of moral principles that are sufficient to cover life's situations. Not committing adultery and treating others the way you want to be treated are examples of these timeless principles (*Exod. 20:14, Matt. 7:12*).

Rules of Action: These are specific rules that derive from broader principles and are tied to concrete situations. God's command to Gideon to destroy the altar of Baal and erect an altar to the Lord (*Judg. 6:25, 26*), Jesus' command to the rich young ruler to sell all his possessions (*Matt. 19:21*), and His command to Peter to put his sword away (*Matt. 26:52*) are not commands specifically to us today. But that does not mean they are irrelevant. When it comes to reflecting on issues of worship, idolatry, finances, priorities, and violence, these commands should be referenced in order to better ascertain God's will in whatever particular situation we may be in.

Normative Models: The stories of the Bible also serve as moral standards. Paul explains that "these things [historical accounts of Israel's history] . . . were written down for our instruction" (*1 Cor. 10:11, ESV*). These stories are *normative* because they serve as warnings to us in order "that we might not desire evil as they did" (*1 Cor. 10:6, ESV*). Additionally, they are models because they are intended for imitation. These models sometimes offer benefits that principles and rules of action don't. They help us to identify with the characters who experience struggles and temptations when God's moral principles are at stake. In narratives, the consequences of either following or rebelling against moral standards are highlighted, and chains of cause and effect are on display. Kiš remarks (in "Biblical Narratives and Christian Decision") on the benefits of reading Bible stories as normative models: "We can learn lessons without actually experiencing sin for ourselves. Normative models help us learn by proxy."—Page 29.

The Bible's normative models also can be helpful when two biblical principles conflict in a given situation. A Bible story will often provide the solution to the conflict. In addition, the moral principle may be clear at times, but there are still multiple specific courses of action (rules of action) that seem to apply. Which one do we take? Often, normative models, as Kiš notes, can "serve to tip the scales."—Page 30.

Some students in your class may see this brief primer on Christian ethics as too focused on behavior, at best, and too legalistic, at worst. What about the Holy Spirit's work in the life? What about being saved by

grace? These and other dimensions of salvation are all assumed to be in place as one is faced with ethical challenges. It may be good to end the discussion with the reminder that choices script our futures. No wonder, then, that a God of love would command and reinforce principles of moral conduct (ethics) (*Heb. 12:5–8, Rev. 3:19*) that would ensure we enjoy life “more abundantly” now and “will have eternal life in the world to come” (*John 10:10, Luke 18:30, NLT*). We would not expect anything less of an earthly father. Why expect less from our heavenly Father?

Part III: Life Application

The previous section on ethics was heavy on theory. As important as theory is, now is the opportunity to take that ethical framework discussed and briefly apply it to the far-reaching choices the lesson highlights. Here are some scenarios we may face for choosing a spouse.

Scenario 1: A friend of yours has just come out of a second failed marriage. There is now someone in church who has captured his or her attention. This friend has come to you for counsel. What are some principles, rules of action, or normative models from Scripture you could share?

Possible Approach: The lesson authors take a fascinating principled approach to preparing for marriage by invoking the golden rule in order to become the kind of spouse one would want. This approach means that if one is seeking to be married, he or she should first cultivate the qualities within that he or she is searching for in another.

The story of Isaac and Rebekah also could serve as a normative model in that: (1) Isaac trusts others in the choice of a spouse (*Gen. 24:1–4*); (2) a woman from his idolatrous homeland is not considered an option (*Gen. 24:6*); (3) Isaac was meditating (perhaps in prayer) the evening Rebekah arrived (*Gen. 24:63*); and (4) all parties seemed pleased with the arrangement.

Scenario 2: You have a friend who lives in an area where polygamy is legal. He is considering taking a second wife. Furthermore, he feels the Bible does not explicitly forbid polygamy. Besides, many patriarchs in the Bible had multiple wives. How could you use the ethical framework discussed to steer him differently?

Possible Approach: A rule of action could be referenced in Leviticus 18:18, which states, “Neither shalt thou take a wife to her sister, to vex her, to uncover her nakedness, beside the other in her life time.”

Interestingly, this text could be used to support polygamy if it indeed

