

35. Getting in the way of God's will

April 6, 2014

You might have had a situation like the one that I am about to describe just before you came to the church this morning or you may remember having it while your children were growing up at your home.

You are trying to get ready to go to church while you feed your children and clothe them and herd them out the door and get in the car . It sounds easy, but the real task is not. Because one of your kids is doing everything she can not to do what you tell her to do; and her younger brother can not even put on a simple T -shirt for last 10 minutes. As you help him get dressed, you feel like you are putting all eight wiggling legs of a very unhappy octopus into eight holes of a moving fishing net on a windy day.

By the time you finally get them in your car , you feel like you just have run a marathon and you are completely exhausted. And guess what, it 's only morning.

More often than we'd like to admit, we act like our uncooperative children to the Lord and we get in the way of His will by telling Him that He should listen to our advice; or we look for loopholes in His commands in the Bible; or , this is our favorite method, we pretend that we can not hear Him – by telling Him, "Uh Lord, You are breaking up. I can not hear You well, sorry."

It is bad enough for us to get in the way of God's will for us, but it is really bad for us to get in the way of His will for others with our opinions. I believe that the Lord has a great lesson for us to learn from the well-intentioned people for apostle Paul and the strong determination of Paul this morning.

A. HEADING TO JERUSALEM

Acts 21:1-3 Now it came to pass, that when we had departed from them and set sail, running a straight course we came to Cos, the following day to Rhodes, and from there to Patara. 2 And finding a ship sailing over to Phoenicia, we went aboard and set sail. 3 When we had sighted Cyprus, we passed it on the left, sailed to Syria, and landed at Tyre; for there the ship was to unload her cargo.

In chapter 20, we learned that apostle Paul felt that the Lord was telling him to go to Jerusalem as soon as possible. At the same time, the Lord revealed to him that when Paul gets there, he would be arrested and eventually executed. I don't think that he was overjoyed that his head would be separated from his shoulders by an ax, but nothing would deter him from doing what the Lord wanted him to do, NOTHING.

You can feel the sense of urgency from Paul as he ditched a local ship that stopped at every harbor, he and his missionary team jumped on the ship that took them from Patara to Tyre directly.

B. CONFLICTING ADVICE IN TYRE

Acts 21:4-6 And finding disciples, we stayed there seven days. They told Paul through the Spirit not to go up to Jerusalem. 5 When we had come to the end of those days, we departed and went on our way; and they all accompanied us, with wives and children, till we were out of the city . And we knelt down on the shore and prayed. 6 When we had taken our leave of one another , we boarded the ship, and they returned home.

So far just about everyone was disagreeing with Paul about his trip to Jerusalem when they learned that he would be arrested there. They all told him that he should not go. In v4, Dr. Luke recorded, "They told Paul through the Spirit not to go up to Jerusalem". Does this mean that Paul didn't get it right from the Lord? After all, we know that Paul was a sinner just like the rest of us and made a few booboos.

Let's think about 'pro' and 'con' of Paul's journey to Jerusalem:

1) On the 'con' side – Is the Holy Spirit giving warnings to Paul to stay away from Jerusalem as it said in v4, but Paul was being stubborn and too proud to admit that he got it wrong?

2) On the 'pro' side – Paul could take all these comments against his trip to Jerusalem as warnings rather than as total prohibitions.

If we look at the original Greek manuscript of this portion, it would explain to us a whole lot better. In the Greek, Dr. Luke, the author of the Book of Acts did not use the Greek negative 'ou' which means 'absolute prohibition', but he used 'me' which has a partial negative. Later in chapter 23, we will find out that it was the Lord's will for Paul to be in Jerusalem and get arrested there.

Sometimes people think they know God's will for our lives, and they tell us in definite terms that we are going in the wrong direction. They may even express their opinion in their prayers as we listen. As the people prayed for Paul when he left town, this kind of "Lord-help-him-know-Your-will" prayer may have been on their lips.

I wouldn't be surprised if Paul was relieved to be on his way again from Tyre. But that was a short lived relief, because soon other people would be giving him their opinions as well.

C. THE SAME SONG, THE SECOND STANZA

Acts 21:7-14 And when we had finished our voyage from Tyre, we came to Ptolemais, greeted the brethren, and stayed with them one day. 8 On the next day we who were Paul's companions departed and came to Caesarea, and entered the house of Philip the evangelist, who was one of the seven, and stayed with him. 9 Now this man had four virgin daughters who prophesied. 10 And as we stayed many days, a certain prophet named Agabus came down from Judea. 11 When he had come to us, he took Paul's belt, bound his own hands and feet, and said, "Thus says the Holy Spirit, 'So shall the Jews at Jerusalem bind the man who owns this belt, and deliver him into the hands of the Gentiles.'" 12 Now when we heard these things, both we and those from that place pleaded with him not to go up to Jerusalem. 13 Then Paul answered, "What do you mean by weeping and breaking my heart? For I am ready not only to be bound, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus." 14 So when he would not be persuaded, we ceased, saying, "The will of the Lord be done."

Just like the believers of Tyre, the Christians in Caesarea begged Paul not to go to Jerusalem. Some would ask, "Weren't Paul's friends merely looking out for his safety and the church's well-being with Paul around? Maybe so. But while they were looking out for Paul's good, the church's good, and their own good, what about God's good and His glory? They did not consider how Paul's ministry in Jerusalem would bring the highest glory to God through Paul, even if it meant death for the beloved Paul.

When we face a difficulty in our lives or in someone whom we dearly love, it is very hard to see beyond that difficulty. We cannot fathom how God can be glorified through that particular trial. So we often demand to the Lord, in our prayers, that He should remove the difficulty, all the while the Lord is planning to strengthen us and others as we go through the trial and bring glory to Him, even if it means death.

You see, our concept of death is the end of life and final because we see everything from the earthly perspective. But the Lord sees everything from His eternal perspective and a believer's death means that he or she is graduating the earthly class and moving into His eternal presence in continuation, not an end.

Paul's insistence on going to Jerusalem despite the dangers predicted by the Holy Spirit was not a result of rebellion, rather an obedient response to the command of the Holy Spirit in his heart. The warnings from the Holy Spirit were intended to prepare Paul, not to stop him. No reasonable believer ever chooses suffering; but he chooses God's will whether it means suffering or not.

God doesn't speak to us today like He did to the OT patriarchs and prophets. But still, we long for some kind of audible instruction, voice mail, email, texting, or something tangible. So when we have to make a major decision, we often seek advice from human sources. Unfortunately, that can complicate matters even more: sometimes the counsel, no matter how well-intentioned, conflicts with God's will.

In our lives there are three sources of advice that can lead us astray:

1) We can receive erroneous advice from our own consciences.

Remember what the great philosopher Jiminy Cricket said about conscience? "Always let your conscience be your guide." Our conscience is not always trustworthy. It can and will justify what we want.

1 Timothy 4:1-2 Now the Spirit expressly says that in latter times some will depart from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrines of demons, 2 speaking lies in hypocrisy, having their own conscience seared with a hot iron,

King Saul was chasing after David all over the wilderness in his jealousy and insecurity. David had a chance to end all of this once and for all, but he wanted the Lord to defend him, so he spared Saul's life. What a godly man! But right after that great spiritual victory, do you know what David did? Let's get to the text in 1 Samuel:

1 Samuel 26:25-27:1 Then Saul said to David, "May you be blessed, my son David! You shall both do great things and also still prevail." So David went on his way, and Saul returned to his place.

1 And David said in his heart, "Now I shall perish someday by the hand of Saul. There is nothing better for me than that I should speedily escape to the land of the Philistines; and Saul will despair of me, to seek me anymore in any part of Israel. So I shall escape out of his hand."

Seriously, David? God protected his life from Saul all this time and now he wanted to run to the enemy stronghold to be protected? Guess who gave this advice? His own conscience. Be careful with what your own conscience says to you.

2) There can be faulty advice from other people.

I know, I know what you are going to say to me now. You'd say, "Didn't the Bible say that there is safety in people's counsels or something like that?" Yes, it did in Proverbs.

Proverbs 11:14 Where there is no counsel, the people fall; But in the multitude of counselors there is safety.

After the Babylonian exile, the Lord told Nehemiah to rebuild the Jerusalem wall in the Book of Nehemiah. Nehemiah faithfully obeyed, but certain so-called counselors objected, questioned his motives, and even advised him wrongly to flee for his life into the temple. Wrong!! First of all, the so-called counselors – Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab were not followers of God; second, they had ulterior motives for their advice; third, their advice was against what the Lord told Nehemiah to do and against what God commanded the Israelis to do.

3) We can receive fallible advice from tradition and logic.

Just because “that’s-how-we-always-do-it,” or “It sounds logical” doesn’t mean that we should follow the advice. Actually, our faith in Christ is anything but logical and it is anything but how we used to do it.

A good example of this is Jonah – a Jewish prophet who rejected God’s command to evangelize the people of Nineveh, the enemy of Israel, so he started a non-prophet organization.

Jonah 1:1-2 Now the word of the Lord came to Jonah the son of Amittai, saying, 2 “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry out against it; for their wickedness has come up before Me.”

To Jonah, it was a traditional and logical thing for a Jew to hate the people of Nineveh since they always harassed the Jews and destroyed what they had.

Tragically for him, he sided with tradition and logic, and what resulted was a whale of a problem for poor Jonah.

Listening to advice can lead to trouble. However, sometimes God does communicate His will to us through our consciences, the advice of other godly people, and common sense that came out of tradition and logic. So how do we know when to follow these sources of advice and when not to?

Here are three guidelines that you must use when you take advice from others:

- **Try not to take an advice from unbelievers**

Please note that unbelievers cannot understand the ways of God and the reasons you want to honor God in your life. Their advice is limited to temporal, self-centered, and come from earthly perspective, not to mention ungodly.

- **Look at the reason (s) behind their advice**

This can be tricky. But evaluate the situation from their perspective and see if they have any advantage from you to take their advice. If they have an ulterior motive behind their advice, you might reconsider their counsel and politely discard it.

- **Keep their advice in context of the Scripture**

Even if their advice is godly without any ulterior motive, you must keep everything in context of the Scripture.

1 Thessalonians 5:21 Test all things; hold fast what is good.

D. APPLICATIONS

By learning from Paul’s struggle with his well-meaning advisors, we can hammer out three applications of truth to protect us in this whole realm of giving and receiving counsel:

1) If you seek advice, be discerning .

Please consider three guidelines I gave you a few minutes ago.

2) If you give advice, be wise.

Wise counseling always begins with attentive listening and prayers. Try to fit yourself into the other person's shoes to understand that person's perspective. Step away and take a look at him or her from God's view point. Then ask the Lord to give you His words, not yours.

3) If you decide against the advice, be careful.

You always put what the Lord tells you to do before anyone. Trust Him, He will guide you.

Proverbs 3:5-6 Trust in the Lord with all your heart, And lean not on your own understanding; 6 In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He shall direct your paths.