

THE BEST QUESTION EVER

Series: The Best Question Ever

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Wisdom, Life

Ephesians 5:8-13

Have you ever looked back on your life and realized you made some really stupid decisions - just silly stuff? I remember when I was about 10 years old, I got the most ridiculous haircut. It was a mullet (you know, business in the front, party in the back), but not only that, I had these lines shaved into the sides just to be really cool. It was ridiculous.

Do you have things like that in your life - just silly decisions that you look back on and go, "What on earth was I thinking?" Like, people you dated or clothes you wore. Just silly things.

Then there are those decisions that *almost* put you in a really bad situation - a life-altering place. For me, I was 16 years old and had a single-vehicle accident in which no one was injured. But I was driving too fast through a slick parking lot, and if the timing had been slightly different, I would have collided with a friend's car and probably seriously injured her brother. It was a stupid decision that ended up in a little damage to my car, but could have been much, much worse.

But then there are some decisions that actually *do* take you to that bad place. One drink too many. One bad relationship. One decision in a relationship with someone who isn't your spouse. Those decisions continue to affect your life *forever*.

And when you look back on those choices - the silly ones, the near-misses, and the catastrophic ones, if you're like me, you say, "What on earth was I thinking? I was so obvious! How could I not have seen that? How could I not have made a better decision there?"

Well, the past is the past, right? We can't turn back the clock, but we *can* affect our present and future. So I have a question for you. It's a super scary question. It's one of those questions you might not want to answer (and please don't answer out loud). Are you ready? Here it is:

What decisions are you making right now that a year from now, you'll look back on and say, "What was I thinking?"

That's a scary one, isn't it? Like, what choices are you making in the midst of your life right now that, whether silly, near-misses, or catastrophic, in the future you will look back and say, "You idiot! You knew better! What were you thinking?"

That's a scary question, but a good question - a necessary question.

This morning, and over the next several weeks, we want to dig even deeper into another question - *The Best Question Ever*.

But first, let's pray that God will open our eyes, ears, and hearts to what he has for us this morning.

Prayer

Andy Stanley is an American pastor and author and a really great communicator. I've read several of his books and watched his talks online. But until recently, I hadn't heard of this book he wrote back in 2004 called *The Best Question Ever*. I was made aware of this book by my friend Jay Pathak, who did a series of talks based on the book earlier this year. And so, what you'll hear today and over the following few weeks will lean on and borrow extensively from Andy Stanley's book and my friend Jay's talks. I want to be sure to give credit to those guys. If I say something you think is brilliant, it probably came from them!

In his book, *The Best Question Ever*, Andy Stanley talks about why we make the choices we make, and there are really a few forces that are acting upon us which can keep us from making the best decisions.

The first is *Personal Stupidity*. Let's face it, you and I aren't as smart as we think we are. If you're like me, you think, "I'm actually pretty good at making decisions. I'm mature. I'm responsible." But you know, I think most of us severely overestimate our ability to make good choices. And it's not that we don't have the *capacity* or the *knowledge*. We just overrule ourselves.

We do things like rationalize our decisions. My wife, Melody, loves to bake. And she bakes really tasty stuff like cakes and brownies and muffins and biscuits. And typically, we eat some of what she bakes, and then there are some left over that we put in a container for later.

More often than not, around 10:30 at night, that container of baked goods begins beckoning me - calling my name - "Adam...Adam." And I'm like, "Yes, delicious chocolate brownies?"

Now, in that moment, I have the capacity and knowledge to know that I shouldn't eat a brownie at 10:30, right before I go to bed. There's no logical reason to do so, and plenty of reasons not to. But man, I can certainly come up with some good rationalizations.

"Well, I didn't really eat that much dinner." You know, as if this brownie is going to provide the much-needed nourishment to hold me over until morning.

Or, "I'll just have, like, half of one." That's kind of like, "I'll take half as much poison." That's a horrible rationalization.

Or how about this one, "I really deserve this! I need this!" Really? How many brownies does one *need* in life? How many brownies are going to make a positive impact on, you know, my life? The person I'll become? Like, is that the difference between me and Nelson Mandela or Martin Luther King, Jr, or Saint Francis. They just ate more brownies than me and became better people?

But we rationalize our decisions don't we? And we overrule ourselves. We know better, but then we talk ourselves into things.

We think "I'll just do it this once," or we say really dumb things like, "I can quit whenever I want." You know, if you can quit whenever you want, and you know what you're doing isn't good, then maybe you should just quit. Right? If you can quit whenever you want, then quit!

The thing is, all those little decisions that we make begin to come together to create a pathway for us. It's a pathway toward a certain destiny.

When I was a kid, I used to have these books called, "Choose Your Own Adventure." And the way they worked was that you would read up to a certain point, and then you would have a choice to make. If you choose A, then turn to page 23. If you choose B, turn to page 34. And I would make my choice, turn to the appropriate page, then read along a little further until another choice had to be made, then another, and another.

So, with each choice, the story took a different turn. And each book had multiple storylines and multiple endings - some positive and others not - based on the decisions you made along the way.

And life is kind of like that, isn't it. There are these moments in life where we make decisions that take us in a certain direction. And some of those decisions take us down a path and we can't ever recover. We can't undo our decisions. And so, when we make these decisions, we are moving toward a destiny that we may not like.

You know, no one *plans* to screw up their life. No one *plans* to have a bad marriage. No one looks at their new spouse on their wedding day and says, “Yeah, I plan to hate this person in a few years.” Right? No one *plans* to be an addict. But small decisions over time eventually lead us to that destination. And one day we sort of wake up and go, “How did I get here?”

Prisons and hospitals and mental institutions are *filled* with people asking that question. “How did I end up here?” Partially, it’s our own personal stupidity - in the big things and the small ones - that just adds up over time.

Another force at work is *Cultural Drift*. The culture around us - the world-at-large - is not morally neutral. There is a tug - a current - that is pulling on you and it’s pulling you in a certain direction. We talked the last few weeks about a centered set - where Jesus is at the center of all we hope to be. But our surrounding culture doesn’t pull us toward Jesus, does it? It pulls us away from him.

The Apostle Paul, this really important guy in the first century church, wrote a letter to the church in the city of Ephesus. And in it, in chapter 5, starting in verse 8, Paul has some instructions for the people there. He says:

For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord. Have nothing to do with the fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them. It is shameful even to mention what the disobedient do in secret. But everything exposed by the light becomes visible—and everything that is illuminated becomes a light.
Ephesians 5:8-13

What Paul’s saying is that the decisions people make - the choices you and I make - will often lead us to darker and darker places. But if you are set apart by God you can do something cool - not because of your own goodness or morality, but because of his grace - you can open up and assess honestly your life. You can *expose* your life to the light.

You know, when Paul says, “Have nothing to do with fruitless deeds of darkness, but rather expose them,” he’s not saying, “Yeah, expose those evil people.” You know, “Expose those sinners!” No, he’s saying, look at the fruit of your *own* decisions and expose it. Let the light of Jesus shine on it and deal with it. The great thing about Jesus is that he loves us so much and has so much grace for us that we can step into the light, really examine the person we’re becoming in light of the decisions we’ve made, and we can do so with confidence that he’s not going to stop loving us for it. There’s no risk with Jesus if we step into this open, exposing light.

Paul goes on, in verse 15, to say something very important. He says:

Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is.

Ephesians 5:15-17

The world around us is not morally neutral. There is a pull, a current, trying to draw us away from Jesus - from that light that God gives us to shine on, expose, and deal with our lives. God has a light to illuminate our lives and help us to make better decisions, but there is something tugging at us - pulling us away from that light. The days are evil.

And it’s easy to see it around us. Advertisements try to get us to spend money on unimportant things, rather than important things. The giant contraceptive display at the front of the store beckons us to make a somewhat better decision in the midst of our bad decision. Or how about this, something that has been the ruin of many families in the west and is now creeping into East Africa - Buy Now, Pay Later.

And people spend their money unwisely, they buy a condom thinking they’re making the best choice, they go into debt for something they don’t need, and when you do those things, you don’t realize you’re being pulled further and further away from Jesus.

When I was a kid, we would go to the beach every summer. We didn’t live too far from the east coast of the United States, and so we would load up our car every year and take a family trip to the beach. And it was at the beach that I learned about undertow.

Undertow is this force in the water - this current - that can pull you this way and that without you knowing it. It happened nearly every year. I would go out into the ocean, play in the waves, float on my back, splash around, and then at some point, I would look up and my parents were nowhere to be found. I would look to where I thought our stuff was - look for our beach umbrella - and it wasn’t there.

And I would sort of fight my way back into the shore to take a closer look, and still it wasn’t there. And then maybe I would see them - like, way down the beach - and I would realize, wow, that undertow was strong. Sometimes, it would carry me like 200 meters down the beach without me realizing it - this subtle, nearly undetectable force drawing me away from my parents, away from my beach center.

When we mindlessly surf the waves of our surrounding culture, we ride a current that pulls us away from Jesus - a cultural drift. We have to be mindful of that tug. We have to work against it. It doesn’t mean we don’t get in the water. It doesn’t mean we put ourselves in a bubble and stop engaging with our culture. But it means we must be *aware* that the world is not morally neutral, and we have to work to move toward Jesus, rather than drifting away.

So personal stupidity plays a role in our decisions, cultural drift draws us away from Jesus, and then the third factor at play is this: *Asking the wrong questions.*

We ask the wrong questions, and then our answers to those questions lead us in the wrong direction. When faced with a decision, sometimes we ask questions like, “Is there anything wrong with this decision?” You know, like that’s the bar we should be shooting for in our lives. Like, well, there’s nothing overtly *wrong* with it, so I guess I should do it. But look, *just because it’s not wrong doesn’t mean it’s right...or helpful, or the best way forward.*

Or, you know, we ask other questions like, “Is this going to be fun?” I mean, be honest, I was talking about rationalizing earlier. There are a lot of things we can rationalize if we think they’re going to be fun! Maybe it will be worth whatever the consequences are if it’s just fun enough.

Or another really bad question we sometimes ask, especially when it comes to morally questionable things, is, “How far can I go without experiencing consequences?” You know, Melody and I got married really young, but I remember well in my teen years asking this question multiple times a week: “How far is too far?” That’s a pretty common question when people are dating, right? How far is too far?

Well, if you’re asking that question, you’re probably already in trouble. If you’re teetering so close to the edge of the cliff that you’re trying to determine just how close you can get before falling off, then it’s probably just time to back up. If you’re putting your foot out there and, you know, loose rock is falling down into the valley below, it’s time to take a few steps back. “How far is too far?” is the wrong question to ask.

Most of you guys know that I have two small girls. And this is a constant conversation with my girls. You know, I’ll tell Lucy, my 5 year old, “Don’t swing on the door.” And I’ll come into the room a couple of minutes later and find her hanging on the door. “I’m not swinging!” Any parents out there know what I’m talking about? Like, “I’m not doing the thing you told me not to do, but I’m doing the closest thing possible to it, just to see if maybe I can get away with it - to see how far is too far - how far I can go without experiencing consequences.”

The problem with asking the wrong questions is that our answers lead us to unwanted destinations. Just because there’s nothing wrong with the decision doesn’t mean it’s the best decision. Just because it’s fun doesn’t mean it’s a good choice. Sometimes we learn how far is too far after we’ve gone too far!

Have you made decisions in your life based on some of these questions? Think about the bad decisions you’ve made. How many times were you asking the wrong questions?

So, what's the right question? What is the best question ever? It must be mind-blowing right? Are you ready? Here it is:

What is the wise thing to do?

That's it. What is the wise thing to do? And it seems really simple, and really, like, "That's it? That's the best question *ever*?" Well, maybe more to the point, it's the most *useful* question ever. It's a question that will consistently point you in the right direction.

When you ask, "What is the wise thing to do?" you're really asking, "What decision will lead me in the direction of my preferred destination?" And the reason wisdom is so important is that in a lot of the choices in our life, *our* best choice might be different from someone else's. In trying to determine the wise thing to do, we have to honestly assess our past, our present, and our future. Where have I come from, where am I now, and where would I like to go.

So, let's think about that for a minute. In light of my past, my present, and my preferred future, what is the wise decision for me to make?

So, in light of your past - you know our past can be a really complicated thing. There is a lot in my past that wasn't dictated by me. A lot of my past was sort of thrust upon me, right? I had no control over where I was born, the kind of family I was born into, the kind of parents I had, what issues they had, what my siblings were like. I didn't even have any choice as to what kind of education I was going to receive, or what extracurricular activities were available to me. Most of my childhood was out of my control, and even much of my adulthood has been that way.

I consider myself fortunate in most of those areas, but we all sort of have to play the hand we're dealt, right? And I think it's important for a guy like me - a western, white, middle class, educated man - to realize that not everyone has the advantages I've had. I can wax poetic about human potential all I want, and some people *are* able to rise above their circumstance, but we have to realize that not everybody is dealt a favorable hand in life. We do not all have an equal story.

I was talking the other day to my friend Julian. Julian grew up poor in a tough area, he worked hard, and has become quite successful in business. But Julian is a black man living in America, and there are people who think he shouldn't be successful because of his skin color. Or they think that his success must have come through illegal means. And so, when Julian drives his sports car through town, he gets pulled over by the police and questioned. Where did he get that car? What does he do for a living? Why? Because a black guy shouldn't be driving a car like that...in their opinion.

I could drive the same car down the same street - a car I have no business driving - and no one would ever pull me over. No one would ask me questions. That's something I don't have to deal with. You see, not everyone is dealt the same hand. Not everyone has an equal story.

And your past affects your present and future. It affects things like the way you interact with other people. It affects the way you see God. It affects how certain circumstances, people, and even words impact you.

You know, when you get married, one of the realizations you have to come to - one of the assessments you have to make is, "How will my past and my spouse's past affect our relationship?" If one of you has been abused in the past, that will affect your marriage. If one of you had parent's whose relationship was unhealthy, that will affect your relationship. If one of you grew up in a single-parent home, that will affect your relationship. If you come from very different cultures, that will affect your marriage. It's not that any of these are insurmountable obstacles, but we have to be aware that our past affects us, and we need to consider our past when making decisions.

You may need to think differently about your decisions based on your past. If you've struggled with alcohol, maybe you shouldn't meet your friends at the bar. If you've had sexual issues, maybe you shouldn't hire an assistant of the opposite sex. If you have a history of bad financial decisions, maybe you shouldn't be the treasurer of your company.

We have to consider our past when making these decisions.

And then we have to look at our decisions in light of our present circumstances. You know, every stage of life comes with certain opportunities and challenges. In the church where we served in the U.S., we had a *ton* of families with little kids. And I said to our pastor one time, "You know, we shouldn't really expect much out of these folks. We just need to help them *survive!*" If you've got little kids, you know what I mean. Forget about taking some big strides for the Kingdom of God. Some days, you just hope to make it to bedtime!

But eventually, you'll move out of that stage and onto a different stage where you'll have different challenges, but also different opportunities. Life changes, and we change with it. I mean, think about it. What if you functioned as an adult like you functioned as a kid?

Birthday parties would look way different wouldn't they?

Hey guys, Phil's turning 40! We're all going to wear our favorite superhero pajamas, jump in a bouncy castle, build a blanket fort and have a sleepover! That's weird, right?

And then we all know people who are still trying to live like they're 18 when they're 35, right? You know, if you have a spouse and kids, but you're out at the club until 4am every night, you've kind of missed it in your stage of life. It's time to grow up. Some people are tempted to live like they don't have kids or responsibilities when they do have kids and responsibilities.

Some people are tempted to live like married people when they aren't married. You've combined your money, you live under the same roof, maybe you even have kids together. All that's great! So, get married. If you're living like you're married, but you aren't married, fix it! Either get married or stop acting like you are. What's the point of sort of pretending you're in a stage of life you aren't in?

But sometimes we have a hard time seeing the opportunities in our present circumstances, don't we. Our challenges are obvious, but sometimes we only see the opportunities of our stage of life when we look in the rear view mirror. We say, "Man, I wish I had spent more time with my kids," or, "I wish I had loved my wife better," or like, now that I have kids, I look back at the 12 years Melody and I were married without kids and think, "Dude, what were we thinking? We had so much freedom and time! We could have done so much!"

It's important when making decisions that we consider our choices in light of our present circumstances. What is the wise thing to do given my current stage in life?

And then lastly, we must consider our decisions in light of our preferred future. Who do I want to be, and how does that compare to who I'm becoming? Are the decisions I'm making leading me down the path toward the person I want to be?

Jay Pathak has a mentor - a guy well into his 70s - who told him, "All you young folks overestimate what you can do in a year. But you underestimate what you can do in 5 years." And man, that's true. Have you ever sat down on January 1st and said, "OK, this is the year that *everything* changes." And then, by like, January 15th, you're like, "OK, maybe not." We sort of bite off more than we can chew sometimes.

But then, when we look out 5 years or 10 years, sometimes we cut ourselves short. We underestimate the amount of change that can happen in that time. We forget that a decision today affects the choices available tomorrow, which affect the choices next week. And over a few years, making wise decisions can take us to a very different place than where we are today.

Last week, many of you wrote on little index cards some ideas for how this church could bring life to the city of Nakuru over the next 10 years. And I'm glad to report that most of you, I don't think, underestimated the possibilities. But some of you did. Man, do you have any idea what could happen if we, through a concerted, community effort, chose to pursue

God's vision for this church and this city over the next *10 years*? But we have to make some good choices here and now in order to move toward that preferred future.

The same is true for you as an individual. What kind of person do you want to be in 5 years? In 10 years? What kind of mom or dad do you want to be? What kind of husband or wife? What kind of employee or employer? What kind of grandparent do you want to be?

The best question ever helps us to consider all these factors. Asking, "What is the wise thing to do?" causes us to consider our decision in light of our past, present, and future as well as helping us buck against our proclivity to do stupid things, to be drawn by the cultural undertow, and to ask the wrong questions.

Over the next three weeks, we're going to be applying this question to three major areas of our lives - time, money, and authority. So, I hope you'll plan to join us for some really practical life application of these ideas.

We're going to move now into a time of personal response. And there several ways to respond:

1. Singing

We're going to sing some songs together that help us reflect on some of these things.

While that singing is taking place, you will also have the opportunity for prayer.

2. Prayer

If you need prayer for anything at all, we have people here who are eager to do that.

Also, while that is going on, you'll have a chance to take communion

3. Communion

Communion is a symbolic act, instituted by Jesus as a way for us to remember the way he willingly died for us. The unleavened bread serves as a symbol of Jesus' body broken on the cross. The wine or juice symbolize his blood that was spilled for us.

We have people ready to serve you communion. Juice is on your left, wine is on your right. Feel free to partake of either, as it fits with your tradition. Just break off a piece of the bread, dip it in the cup, and eat.

We offer communion each week for *anyone* who wants to take it. There's no membership requirement or hoops to jump through. You are guests at this symbolic table of Jesus, so please feel free to partake.

4. Giving

Lastly, during this time, you will have an opportunity to give financially to the work of this church. If you're a guest with us today, we don't expect you to give anything. However, for those who consider this your church home, and for those who believe in what we're trying to do here, this is our chance to give back to God a portion of what he has given us, and to support the work he has called this church to in Nakuru.

There is a tall box at the back with a slot in it. You can place your gifts in that box at any time as we are singing together.

So those are the four ways to respond: Singing, Prayer, Communion, and Giving. All will be happening simultaneously. There's no order you have to do them in. You don't have to do them all. You don't have to do any of them. This is your time to respond in whatever way you desire.

At the end of that time, I'll pray a prayer of blessing over you before you go.

Closing Prayer