

Joke: 2 hunters are lost in the woods. . .After wandering around for a couple hours they decide to weigh their options, one says, "I heard if you shoot in the air someone will hear and come to your rescue", so they fire a few times in the air and wait, nothing happens so they try again a couple more times, after a few hours of this they're starting to get worried and one says, "I hope we get help soon", to which the other responds, "I know right, I am almost out of arrows"

Week 3: Better Choices

Every choice we make in life has consequences.

And so, we must use wisdom that is given to us by God to choose wisely. That all begins with a fear of God. This fear is not one that makes us scared but it is a reverence and respect for the Holy God, and that fear should mature into a deep and abiding trust.

Ultimately it is our trust in God that helps us make better choices.

Two weeks ago, we began a sermon series called Better. That sounds good, doesn't it? I know there are areas in my life that I need to do better in. I think we probably all have aspects of our lives that we would like to see improve and become better.

I am convinced that living a life with Jesus is the best way to live and when we submit to Him, our lives are better. We started this series by looking at the impact God can have in our lives when we

begin the new year with better priorities. When we put God first, the rest of our lives seem to fall into order. If we get this backward, the most important things in our lives suffer. Last time we were together, we discovered that the people we surround ourselves with can have far reaching effects on who we become.

Sometimes it is important for us to focus on having better relationships to experience the life that God has for us. Today we continue our series and dive into the need for better choices.

Now before you go poking the person sitting next to you or think in your mind about all the people that need to hear this message, I want you to recognize that we all struggle from time to time making wise choices and doing the right things. And the truth is when we make bad choices, we open ourselves up to toxic things that can harm us from the inside out.

STORY: There's a comedian named Jim Gaffigan and he has a hilarious bit about Hot Pockets. You know, the frozen treats that either come out of the microwave lava-hot or enter your mouth like a piece of ice. In his bit he makes some really good points. There is nothing about the Hot Pocket that can possibly be healthy for us. But it is tasty, so we consume it without a second thought. But, have you ever questioned, what is in one exactly? If your a lover of Hot pockets you may not want to. And let me just say this, this message is not to beat up on the Hot Pocket company. But the truth is we make choices to consume things in our lives without realizing the consequences that may come from that choice. And more importantly we allow things into our hearts and minds as well

sometimes not realizing the consequences of those either. So, just maybe this year, we need to begin to make better choices.

So, we need proper wisdom, wisdom that comes from God or all of us run the risk of allowing toxic things into our hearts and minds.

And better choices begin with a fear of God

A desire to make better decisions in our lives more than likely stems from a series of bad ones in the past. And so, we must make some intentional changes for there to be different outcomes.

It has been said that the definition of insanity is do the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.

They make filters that can be used when backpacking in the wilderness for water so that it becomes clean and safe for drinking, where it otherwise may not be. In like manner, to reduce poor choices, we must have some sort of filter to protect ourselves from toxic decisions as well.

And in the book of Proverbs it offers us the best way to live with wisdom in its very first chapter.

Proverbs 1:7 (NIV): The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and instruction.

Let's jump to chapter 9. . .

Proverbs 9:10 (NIV): The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.

The author tells us that the beginning of knowledge and wisdom is having a fear of God.

I began last year talking about having the fear of the Lord. And here we are again this year doing the same because I'm afraid many of us don't understand exactly what it is because the idea of fearing God seems to go against the teaching that we are loved by God. And church we are loved by God. And why would we fear Him if He loves us?

I mean think about it we read Scripture that tells us perfect love casts out all fear.

And how does having a fear of the Lord help us in making better choices? The word for fear in our Scripture is best understood as reverence or respect.

When we begin with a deep reverence and respect for God because of His position before us, as the all powerful creator and our position before Him, as humans, we begin to live with wisdom in our everyday choices.

The fear of the Lord is not the same as being scared of God.

To fear God is to desire to live in harmony with His Word and to honor Him in all that you do.

The evangelist Ray Comfort once said it like this, **“When men don’t fear God, they give themselves to evil.”**

In his book *The Awe of God*, John Bevere writes, “someone who’s scared of God has something to hide. Recall, in the garden, once Adam sinned he and Eve hid from the presence of the Lord. However, the person who fears God has nothing to hide. He or she is terrified of being away from God.”

When we are given a list of toxic choices that seem like a good choice at the moment, we sometimes need to have some kind of reason to flee. So we flee sin, we flee the thing which could harm us because we have a reverence, and respect of our God. Knowing that He knows what is best for us. You may think you know what’s good for you, He knows what’s best for you.

Think back a bit about what it was like to be a child in the kitchen when your parents were cooking. When ever you got too close to the stove, maybe you heard a loud warning, or even a little slap on the hand. That warning, that slap wasn’t because your parents were upset with you or because you were in danger from them, but because you were in danger of being burned without their intervention.

The same is true when living with the fear of the Lord. He wants to protect us from the things we may do that could harm us or our relationship with Him. And because I know that God is looking out for my best interest, I don’t want to make decisions that might break His heart. I don’t want to make decisions that would lead to negative outcomes that might harm myself or others.

So, we receive His discipline in our lives and learn to move from fear to trust because we know He loves us. But it all begins with a fear of God.

Sometimes our minds and hearts can try and fool us into believing that just a little bit of bad choices won't make much of a difference. We think we can dip our toe, or take a taste, and it won't affect us negatively. The problem is that even a trace of toxins can be incredibly harmful for us from the inside out.

The book of James speaks of this in chapter 2. The author is addressing the listener's interest in only focusing on certain parts of the law while disregarding other parts, as if they were applying different levels of severity to each sin, making some a big problem, and some not a big deal.

James 2:10 (NIV): For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.

Let me pause here for just a minute because I don't want you to think I'm telling you that we are living under the law, we are not, we are living under grace.

It is by his grace we have been saved, it's by His grace we are here. And it is His grace that empowers us to live holy.

But what James is telling us is that we have a tendency to justify our sins thinking they aren't as bad as somebody else's and James is telling us otherwise.

I love what Paul says. . .

2 Corinthians 5:9 (TPT): 9 So whether we live or die we make it our life's passion to live our lives pleasing to him.

Here's the truth church, we cannot do anything to make God love us more or less, but we are responsible for how pleased He is with us.

So, to have better choices this year, we must commit to living with wisdom in every area of our lives. The problem is that we too often convince ourselves that we can dabble in some what some might even call a lesser sin and make it out unscathed.

But the truth is that sin always takes us further than we want to go, makes us stay longer than we want to stay, and costs us more than we want to pay.

So, we must commit to better choices in the seemingly small and the big things of life.

STORY: Dr. Ralph Sockman once wrote about an experience he had while standing on the edge of Niagara Falls one clear, cold March day. Wrapped in white winter garments, the giant falls glistened in the bright sun. As some birds swooped down to snatch a drink from the clear water, Sockman's companion told how he had seen birds carried over the edge of the precipice because as they dipped down for a drink, tiny droplets of ice would form on their wings. As they returned for additional drinks more ice would weigh down their bodies until they couldn't rise above the cascading

waters. Flapping their wings, the birds would suddenly drop over the falls.

That should be a warning to us. A seemingly little choice to visit that website, may not seem like a big deal. But. . .

That choice to cheat on your taxes. May not seem like a big deal. But. . .

A choice to gossip just a little about that person. May not seem like much. But. . .

All these little choices easily become frozen weights that keep us from the better life that God wants for us. We cannot make excuses for a little toxin. We cannot justify a little sin. Sin's goal is always to steal, kill, and destroy. You and I cannot intentionally dabble in it and think we will never be affected.

Galatians 1:10 (TPT): I'm obviously not trying to flatter you or water down my message to be popular with men, but my supreme passion is to please God. For if all I attempt to do is please people, I would not be the true servant of the Messiah.

Here's another truth for you, you will serve whom you fear. Think about it if you fear man, you will ultimately obey man's desire. And far too often we worry more about offending the person before us than the One we were meant to serve.

When it comes to making better choices in our lives, there is often some gray area that can be difficult to navigate. We don't all agree on what should be avoided and what should be permitted.

I believe there is a simple question we can ask ourselves next time we are posed with a choice. Just because I could, does that mean I should?

Here's the thing, God has given each of us an incredible gift that can be a double-edged sword. . . That gift is free will.

And let me just say this about free will. . . free will frees us from being God's puppets and enables us to become God's partners,

We have been given a portion of authority to make decisions for our lives that affect us and others. We can choose what we will wear each day. We can choose what movies we will watch. We can choose how we speak to people. We have a choice in the matter.

And God allows us to choose to love Him or not. He chooses to love us and gave Jesus for us to show His love to us. And hear this church, love is a choice not a feeling. I choose to love God.

Job said, though he slay me I will still trust Him. The three Hebrew children said, God is able to deliver me but even if he doesn't. Joshua asked choose you this day whom you will serve but as for me and my house we will choose the Lord. The list goes on and on of the people that choose.

STORY: Do you remember the restaurant in Grand Rapids it has been closed for a number of years now but it was called The Sweden House. All you could eat. I remember it well. Joy and I had gone there for dinner and I had eaten to my hearts content. And I must say on this particular night I was more than content. And I knew I didn't need dessert but they had a dessert, fried ice cream, who can pass up fried ice cream? Apparently not me because even though I was stuffed to the gills I decided I needed that fried ice cream and when we left the place my stomach hurt so bad as we arrived at our car I literally sat in the seat and didn't Bo couldn't move out of that parking spot for about 5 minutes. I have to admit that I made a really bad choice.

And so, we must realize that to make better choices in our lives, we must admit that just because we can do something, doesn't mean we should do something. Paul writes about this in the book of 1 Corinthians.

1 Corinthians 6:12 (TPT): It's true that our freedom allows us to do anything, but that doesn't mean that everything we do is good for us. I'm free to do as I choose, but I choose to never be enslaved to anything.

For context, Paul is specifically addressing some of the poor decisions that the early Church was making in terms of their sexuality. They were trying to make a case as to why it did not really matter what they did with their bodies because they would get a new one at the resurrection anyway. But Paul says that is faulty logic and bad theology. Just because our bodies can engage in sexual acts, does not mean that we should. Paul makes

the case that though we may feel like we are most free when we can do whatever we want, that we are actually mastered by sin when we make unwise choices without the fear of God.

Our choices matter, and just for good measure I'll say again, just because you can doesn't mean you should.

So, someone could choose to drive 90 miles an hour. Someone could spend so much time on Facebook and reconnect and rekindle a flame with an old boyfriend or girlfriend. Someone could choose to abuse drugs and alcohol. You could choose to eat a Hot Pocket. We have that choice. It's called free will but just because you can doesn't mean you should.

What choices have you made in the last year that given a second chance you would change? What choices do you know lie ahead of you that you need God's wisdom to navigate?

And listen church I'm not talking about living in regret. I've done stupid, but I refuse to live there. I'm not going to pitch my tent in that camp. We need to move past the past.

Through prayer we can position ourselves to make better choices, just by asking God to guide us and direct us and be truly open to obey Him and follow His lead.

Scripture tells us if any man lack wisdom let him ask of God.

In addition to God, we have each other. You can make sure you have better relationships in your life as we talked about last time.

And if you have some, lean into those relationships as you plan ahead. Talk through priorities together, goals, dreams, and desires.

The bible tells us in Proverbs that there is “safety in the multitude of counselors.”

There’s no better time than now to start making better decisions.