

PHILIPPIANS (Lesson 4)

Read: Philippians 1:21-27

Dilemmas are a regular occurrence. Some people – at least from all outward appearances – seem to deal with life on a black-and-white basis. Stuff they encounter is either right or wrong. But for many others, we more often than not wind up in the grey area.

Dilemmas have the potential of being some of life's biggest stealers of our joy. Being stuck between two possibilities – where either option is right, or either way is justifiable – can be quite demanding mentally and emotionally. We've all experienced dilemmas in life.

We are in a dilemma when we want to do two different things at the same time. We want to juggle between focusing on our careers and starting a family. To start having children means extra financial pressure and an even greater struggle with time and energy. Yet to wait several years means that we may be too old to have kids. What should we do?

Another type of dilemma occurs when we find ourselves unhappy in our church. But then we have invested so much of our heart, soul and life into the church for so many years. What more our closest circle of friends is there too. So, do we stick it out and try to help bring about needed changes, which may not be too promising and could create more ill feelings, or do we graciously declare our disagreement and leave?

What about dealing with a rebellious teenager? He or she has moved out of the home and is living a lifestyle that is both personally destructive and disappointing to you. But when they still come to you for financial assistance, do you help, or do you resist? Seems so simple to decide on paper, but few dilemmas are more difficult.

There is also the dilemma of wanting to be in two places at the same time. You love living where you've been for years. Moving would bring career and financial advancement. To leave, however, would be difficult because of the stability and the relationships you and your kids have built in your community.

We weigh both sides. Neither is ideal, yet both have their benefits. It is a classic dilemma. Each pull at us and introduces numerous and deep feelings of strain, which can quickly drain our joy. Dilemmas affect everyone regardless of age. Being older and wiser doesn't mean we are immune to its problems.

All this brings us back to the man we have been getting to know better, Paul, a prisoner of Rome in his own house. We have watched him react positively to his circumstances, and we have cheered him on as he wrote words of encouragement to his friends in Philippi.

COLLECTIVE

Now we find ourselves identifying with his own personal dilemma to which he admits when he wrote: *For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose. But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better; yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake. (Philippians 1:21-24)*

Paul's dearest friend, in fact his most intimate relationship on earth, was Christ. No one else meant more to him. Therefore, the thought of being with Christ brought Paul great joy.

When someone who is eternal and lives in heaven means that much to you, an inescapable dilemma is created. You want to be with Him! Now! That explains why Paul did not hesitate to write "to die is gain". However, his work on earth was unfinished. God had more He wanted to do through His servant Paul who was then under house arrest in Rome. Paul knew that was what cause of the dilemma. He was between a rock and a hard place, or as he put it – "hard-pressed from both directions". And what were they?

- 1) "Having the desire to depart and be with Christ" (which he called "very much better"), and
- 2) "To remain on in the flesh ... for your sake" (which he admitted, "is more necessary").

When we arrive at such dilemmas in life and are unable to decipher the right direction to go, if we hope to maintain our joy in the process, we must allow the Lord to be our Guide, our Strength, our Wisdom and our all! It is easy to read those words, but so tough to carry through on them.

When we do, however, it is nothing short of remarkable how peaceful and happy we can remain. The pressure is on His shoulders, the responsibility is on Him, the ball is in His court. An unexplainable joy envelops us when we do that. As viewed by others, it may be considered outrageous joy. Why?

Because such an unusual method of dealing with dilemmas is rare. There aren't many people willing to turn the reins over to God. It requires humility, something which is difficult for so many of us, especially if you are someone very capable.

But it works! The Lord is a Master at taking our turmoil and revealing the best possible solution to us. As Peter once wrote: *"Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety upon Him because He cares for you." (1 Peter 5:6-7)*

When we do that, He trades us His joy for our anxiety, as He then works things out and makes it clear to us which next step to take. Thus, we can relax, we can release our tension, and we won't lose our joy.

COLLECTIVE

Two final principles emerge from the things we have been thinking about in this chapter:

- 1) Making right decisions amidst dilemmas forces us to rethink our priorities. There is nothing quite like a dilemma to bring us back to what is essential. Happy is the one who sets aside selfish ambition and personal preference for God's will and way.
- 2) Choosing the right priorities forces us to reconsider the importance of Christ in our lives. There are many voices these days. Some are loud, many are persuasive, and a few are downright convincing. It can be confusing. If you listen long enough, you will be tempted to just let your feelings be your guide or think only of yourself. Initially you will get a rush of pleasure and satisfaction but ultimately you will wind up disappointed and disillusioned.

Reflection & discussion:

- 1) *Describe an example of a dilemma you have faced and how you found direction.*