

A GPS for Life

How to make God-honoring decisions

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Thinking about my weekend sermon, I felt anxious. I didn't know what to say.

Two contentious political issues were on the ballot in my home state of Ohio. For many people, the choice was a matter of right and wrong. However, not everyone agreed on which side was *right*, and which one was *wrong*.

I knew some parishioners expected me to take a stand. Others thought I should steer clear of politics.

As a pastor, I wanted to provide guidance. I also realized congregants couldn't come to me with every personal, political, and cultural decision they made.

What tool could I offer them for moments like these?

The Early Church

Such cultural dilemmas are nothing new. Much of the Bible deals with how God's people are to live amid conflicting belief systems.

Surrounded by pagan kingdoms, Israel's calling was to be a holy nation. Daniel and his friends were exiles in a country that did not share their faith.

In Acts 15, the first-century Church struggled with how to disciple members from different backgrounds. Divisions among believers revolved around two questions. The first had to do with salvation. Should Gentile converts submit to circumcision, or was grace truly sufficient (Acts 15:1,11)?

The second question concerned diversity. How could Jews and Gentiles come together as a Church community with all their cultural differences?

Such questions were generating tension, condemnation, and confusion. To address these issues, leaders called the Jerusalem Council.

After debate, deliberation, and prayer, leaders determined they should not make it difficult for Gentiles who were turning to God (Acts 15:19). Salvation comes through grace, not ceremonial acts.

The apostles and elders crafted a letter, offering instructions on how Gentile converts should live. Some details of this first-century missive might not make much sense in our

21st-century context. It is, however, extremely insightful as we consider the questions of our times.

It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements: You are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell (Acts 15:28–29).

At first, this might appear to be a list of legalistic rules. Yet there are reasons behind each of these prohibitions, along with important lessons for navigating the issues of our day.

GPS

When I was growing up, people needed cumbersome paper maps to get from Point A to Point B. Today, I simply use the global positioning system app on my phone. This remarkable technology has completely changed the way most Americans navigate.

A GPS helps travelers quickly determine where they are, where they are going, and what maneuvers they need to make to get where they want to be. It does this by connecting users to a source and power that is above and beyond them.

It's a useful analogy for navigating life. With this in mind, I presented my congregation with what I call the GPS framework for making wise, God-honoring decisions. GPS is an acronym for God, People, and Self.

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God

The apostles wanted to know God's will. The Jerusalem Council was not just about articulating what seemed good to them. They sought the Holy Spirit's guidance (Acts 15:28).

Christ's death on the cross had broken down the dividing wall of hostility (Ephesians 2:14). Since Pentecost, the Spirit was being poured out on all people. It pleased God to save both Jews and Gentiles.

For the Gentiles, Christianity meant forsaking idols and serving the one, true God. For the Jews, it meant honoring God above tradition. Only God is worthy of first place in our lives.

Just like those Early Church believers, we must give God the place of prominence in our decision making. During times of uncertainty, we should prayerfully consider before proceeding, *Would this choice or action glorify God?*

Scripture guides us in these matters. The leaders in Acts 15 looked to God's Word. When we properly interpret the Bible and live in obedience to its teaching, we have wisdom for life.

A decision that is out of step with God's Word is the wrong one. Yet I am often surprised at how many people claim to be Christians while disregarding what pleases God. Rather than examining their actions against Scripture, they make culture their guide.

Many assume whatever is legal or socially acceptable must be OK. They are hesitant to evangelize their friends because they don't want to talk about exclusive truth claims. This kind of thinking is far from the teachings of Jesus and the apostles.

We can't personally or corporately take God's Word for granted. When making decisions, Christians should start by asking what glorifies God so they can line up their choices with His Word and His Spirit.

People

At the core of that correspondence in Acts 15 was a love for people. The welcome Gentile believers received greatly encouraged them. The decision also preserved some dietary customs, taking into account the concerns of Jewish church members. Every person mattered in this decision.

The apostle Paul taught that if one person's freedom becomes a stumbling block to another, love should prevail over liberty. Our goal is doing what leads to peace and mutual edification (Romans 14:19).

As Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 10:32–33, "Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God — even as I try to please everyone in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved."

In other words, what is best for another person's spiritual growth is more important than my personal preference.

Few decisions affect just one person. The actions of each life ripple across the lives of others.

When making decisions, Christians should ask themselves, *How might this encourage or discourage others?*

This perspective leads to other important questions: Could this action offend or confuse someone who is not strong in faith? Am I treating people respectfully? How might my choices cause another believer to stumble spiritually? Have I taken into account what is best for others, loving my neighbors as myself? Am I truly showing people who Jesus is?

Self

Even as they sought to glorify God and encourage others, Early Church members were also concerned about personal spiritual growth.

We must be on guard against anything that creates distance between us and God. Grace is not a license to do whatever we want when we think no one is watching. On the contrary, Paul said grace “teaches us to say ‘No’ to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age” (Titus 2:12).

Paul warned the Corinthians that believing they had a right to do something didn’t make it beneficial (1 Corinthians 6:12).

Sharply critiquing their carelessness toward immorality, Paul said, “Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies” (1 Corinthians 6:19–20).

When facing a personal decision — especially one involving temptation to sin — Christians must consider how it will affect their spiritual lives.

The key question is, *What can I do to draw closer to God rather than drifting further away?*

Every decision we make eventually affects our lives — for better or worse. Anything that weakens our relationship with Jesus is the wrong choice.

Traffic Lights

When I look out across our congregation, I often think about the stories and experiences represented in the room.

I see the faces of people who are at different places on their spiritual journeys. Some have served Jesus for decades. Others are new to the faith. Still others are searching for truth. Pastors can’t assume everyone thinks or lives according to the same standards. This can make navigating cultural matters quite tricky. It has been helpful for me to think of issues like a traffic light.

Some matters are red-light issues. The biblical answer is an emphatic “No!” or “Stop!” Sexual immorality is an obvious example.

Others are green-light issues. These are things we know God wants us to do, like loving our neighbors. There’s no need to stop. Keep living like that. Go!

However, not everything in life is red or green. There are many yellow-light issues, where people aren’t sure what to do. Do I stop? Do I go? How can I know?

I encourage those facing confusing issues to consider the GPS framework. What glorifies God? What encourages other people? What leads you closer to God? Based on those answers, the choices often become much clearer.

Among the topics of concern in Acts 15 were some yellow-light issues. Amid the cultural challenges of Jews and Gentiles worshipping together, there were controversial debates church leaders had to address.

Meat sacrificed to idols isn't a hot-button topic in my congregation. But people *are* facing choices about where they direct their attention and what they consume.

Parents are making decisions concerning their children and social media. Workers are thinking about how to reflect Christ's character in the boardroom or on the factory floor. Teenagers are considering whether the Bible or culture should define their sexual ethics.

Every day, Christians make choices about what is right and wrong. When navigating difficult decisions, we need to remember we do not live in a vacuum. Choices have consequences.

In each decision, we should seek to glorify God, love others, and grow in faith.

Many believers seem to place more value on what they see on social media than what they hear from the Spirit.

Stumbling Blocks

During elementary school, I rode the bus daily. My body was growing fast, and I did not like being cooped up in a small bus seat. Every chance I got, I stretched my legs into the aisle to gain some space.

Without fail, the bus driver spotted my leg and yelled, "Chad! Get your feet out of the aisle!"

I begrudgingly retracted my limbs back into the confines of the seat. Each time, my frustration grew over what I saw as the bus driver's determination to keep me from being comfortable and free.

Looking back, I wish that instead of yelling at me, the driver had taken the time to explain what was really going on. When my legs were in the aisle, I became a trip hazard. A student trying to enter or exit the bus could have easily stumbled over my foot.

Confining me was not the bus driver's intent. She was just trying to keep us all safe. The aisle wasn't the place for my freedom. It was a place for me to show concern for my

fellow travelers. I didn't want anyone to stumble, so keeping my feet out of the aisle would have made sense if only I had understood.

Working through difficult and divisive topics using the GPS framework can help create a biblical community that minimizes stumbling blocks.

Politics

Whether we like it or not, politics are part of congregational life. Believers want to make voting decisions that align with their faith, and they often look to pastors for guidance.

With our state's controversial ballot issues looming, I wanted to equip my diverse congregation to think with the mind of Christ about political matters — without explicitly telling them which box to check.

While pondering this dilemma, I remembered a sermon I had preached a few months earlier. I had presented the GPS acronym as a model for navigating cultural issues. After prayer and consideration, I felt it could also be effective for making political decisions.

Every pastor wants to help people live according to the truths of Scripture, but we can't be there when they are wrestling with a moral question at work or deciding which lever to pull in the voting booth. We must teach them how to apply God's Word and hear from His Spirit in their everyday decisions.

Political tensions can quickly lead to confusion and division in congregations. Like the Church in Acts 15, we need the help of the Holy Spirit.

Discipling people to think in terms of "God, People, and Self" is one way to address those tensions. Prayerfully using this simple, memorable tool not only moves congregants toward God-honoring decisions, but it also encourages them to think more biblically in every aspect of their daily lives.

A few weeks before that contentious state election, I walked my congregation through the issues at hand. Humbly presenting the GPS model as a process of spiritual discovery allowed me to speak truth while taking others on the journey with me.

We began by considering the "G" in the GPS framework: *God*. What does God's Word say about the political choices in front of us? What decision would glorify Him?

The Bible addresses some issues in the political arena. Most Christians can find scriptural clarity on questions relating to the sanctity of life and sexual morality. It is important to present such matters as biblical truth rather than cultural interpretation.

Other issues, however, are not always as clear. These provide opportunities for discussing how the Bible speaks to everyday life.

For example, warnings about intoxication establish principles we can apply to drug legalization debates (Proverbs 20:1; Ephesians 5:18). A biblical view of family informs parental rights questions.

Scripture is not silent about how we should live. The “G” in GPS reminds us to go back to the Bible so we can learn to glorify God in all we do.

My next step was introducing the “P” in the GPS framework: *People*. I encouraged the congregation to be community minded. The American mindset is individualistic, which leads many people to think only in terms of what is best for them personally.

Scripture teaches us to think not only of ourselves, but of others as well — even to the point of loving them as ourselves.

Every political decision has ramifications for people around us. The officials we elect and laws we enact can impact lives for generations to come.

Voting only for our own interests is self-serving. It is important to consider how the things we endorse will affect the needy and vulnerable, as well as future generations. Scripture compels us to take into account the needs and interests of others.

In a recent conversation with a friend, a political, hot-button topic arose. It didn’t take long to realize we saw things quite differently. It wasn’t a matter of scriptural interpretation. Instead, our differences of opinion came down to what we individually believed was best for society.

My friend’s take on the issue came from a genuine heart and his view of what is best for others. Mine did, too. We are both well-meaning Christ followers, but because of our different lived experiences and personal convictions, we came to two different conclusions.

I wanted to tell my friend he was wrong, and I was right. However, I knew it was not that simple. Instead, we found we could agree on the essentials and continue to love each other, even if it meant we might not make the same choices at the ballot box. We both love Jesus. And we both love the friendship Jesus has given us.

This seems to have been the situation in Acts 15. The church debated all kinds of issues. Read 1 Corinthians 10 or Romans 14, and it quickly becomes apparent that the challenges did not disappear after the Jerusalem Council. What we do see, though, is

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that Christians can love one another, without compromise, even when we might not totally agree.

We can begin by asking what is best for others. That is true when we go to church on weekends and when we vote in November. We can do all things for the glory of God and the benefit of others.

As I stood on the platform to talk about what many considered to be contentious political issues, I took note of the peace I had. Using the GPS framework allowed me to get myself out of the way.

I wasn't just endorsing an idea or pushing an agenda. Instead, I was shepherding believers and pointing them to Jesus. In the process, I was growing in Christ as well.

That brings me to the "S": *Self*. Drawing closer to God should be the end goal of every decision we make as Christians.

We are people of the Spirit. We believe the Holy Spirit comes alongside to lead, guide, comfort, and strengthen us. That is true in our spiritual lives, as well as in our family and work lives. Furthermore, I believe the Spirit can lead us in political decisions.

Pastors should encourage congregants to ask the Holy Spirit for direction in how to vote. Unfortunately, many believers seem to place more value on what they see on social media than what they hear from the Spirit.

Rather than leaning on our own understanding, we should trust God to guide us in our civic responses. As we seek the Lord, political seasons can become times of learning to walk in the Spirit.

After the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15, the group of messengers went back to Antioch with instructions that would help believers glorify God, care for one another, and grow in Christ. What I find fascinating is how church members responded when they received the news:

The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message. Judas and Silas, who themselves were prophets, said much to encourage and strengthen the believers. After spending some time there, they were sent off by the believers with the blessing of peace to return to those who had sent them (Acts 15:31–33, emphases added).

Encouragement. Strengthening. Blessing. Peace. As the *New Living Translation* puts it, "There was great joy throughout the church" (verse 31).

Great joy? Were they actually rejoicing over a list of do's and don'ts? Yes, and here is why: There is joy in clarity!

When languishing between ideas, uncertainty causes angst. But when Christians know what is good to the Holy Spirit, that clarity brings joy.

There is freedom in truth and relief in clarity. By considering decisions within the framework of God, People, and Self, I have personally found joy in the truth that clarity can bring. I believe you and your congregation can, too.

Country Roads

Several years ago, our family packed up the minivan and headed to the beach for vacation. On the way home, we drove through the beautiful mountains of West Virginia. As we were cruising down the interstate, our GPS told us to take the next exit.

I had made this journey before. As far I knew, there was no reason to exit. We weren't changing freeways. We were in a remote, mountainous area. My immediate assumption was that the GPS was making a mistake.

Yet for some reason, I took the exit anyway. We were soon traveling unfamiliar country roads, relying totally on the GPS. We no longer heard the constant drone of the interstate. Instead, we were slowing down to navigate sharp curves and steep hills. My family wasn't happy about it. This was not the journey we had planned.

When we finally reached the next on-ramp for the interstate, we noticed traffic was backed up as far as we could see. With guidance from our GPS, we stayed on those country roads for many additional miles, driving past two more on-ramps until we finally reached a point where the interstate was clear and moving again.

We will never know what caused the backup that day. Whatever the issue, we bypassed the whole mess. In the end, our GPS calculated that the detour saved us an hour of travel time — no small thing for tired vacationers.

I was glad I listened to my GPS that day. It directed me in the best way to go, which enabled me to make the right decision.

My hope is believers will do the same when facing difficult life decisions. The GPS framework can connect them to God's wisdom and bring clarity as they pray, study the Bible, listen to the Holy Spirit, and ask key questions.

What will glorify God? What is best for other people? What can we do to grow closer to Jesus?

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