

DECIDING NOT TO DECIDE!

Today's Text: Acts 24: 1-27

Extracts:

But when Felix heard these things, having more accurate knowledge of the Way, he adjourned the proceedings and said, "When Lysias the commander comes down, I will make a decision on your case." ...And after some days, when Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, he sent for Paul and heard him concerning the faith in Christ. Now as he reasoned about righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and answered, "Go away for now; when I have a convenient time I will call for you." Meanwhile he also hoped that money would be given him by Paul, that he might release him. Therefore he sent for him more often and conversed with him. But after two years Porcius Festus succeeded Felix; and Felix wanting to do the Jews a favour, left Paul bound [Acts 24: 22-27].

On September 2, 2012, while clearing out the back seat of his cab before starting his 2 p.m. shift, Adam Wolderin found a black soft laptop case that contained \$221,510.¹ Adam was a cabdriver at the Las Vegas-based Virgin Valley Cab with an average take-home pay of \$350 per week. He handed the laptop case with its huge content to the management of his cab company who found out that the money belonged to a 30 year-old man that had won it at the Las Vegas casinos the night before. In appreciation, the owner gave Adam a tip of \$2,000. Dell-MSN conducted an instant online straw poll and asked its readers, "What would you do if you found a bag of cash in a public place?" Of the 3,265 responses, 30% said they would keep it all; 54% would turn it over to the proper authorities, while 2% would keep some and turn the rest over! But 469 people (14%), that is, 1 in 7 answered, "Not sure." In other words, they decided not to decide!

Some of us find it difficult to take a firm stand on a critical issue by deciding not to decide. We use one excuse or the other to avoid being counted as supporting or opposing a decision that can determine the future of our family or church or place of work or even a nation. Why? In this week's Bible story, Governor Felix found it unable to take a decision on Paul's case even after a formal hearing. Some years later, he was transferred and still did not take a decision! Let us learn an important lesson from that story that will help us to deal with such a problem in our own situations.

¹ Based on Tom Ragan, "Honest Las Vegas cabdriver gets big tip for returning cash," *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, Oct. 8, 2012; <http://www.lvrj.com/news/honest-las-vegas-cabdriver-gets-big-tip-for-returning-cash-173083011.html> ; and "What would you do if you found a bag of cash in a public place?" Dell-MSN online survey; <http://dell.msn.com/>

1. Background: A Roman Governor decides not to decide!

This week's study reminds me of a true story that my maternal uncle told me when I was growing up in rural Nigeria in the colonial era. A rich man encroached on the piece of land that he had inherited from his father. Not wanting to take the laws into his own hands, my uncle took the case to the local customary court. Both sides presented their cases with witnesses and it was obvious to all that my uncle would be vindicated. But to everyone's surprise, the judge passed a queer ruling. Turning to the rich man, he said, "You own the building." Turning to my uncle, he ruled, "You own the land." Looking back now, I now know that that was a classical case of deciding not to decide!

To decide not to decide is to take a stand on a matter that is neither for nor against. That sounds confusing! In the Dell-MSN straw poll referred to above, 14% said that they were not sure of what to say. They will neither keep all the money nor return it to the rightful owner; they will neither keep some nor return some! In other words, they have decided not to decide. Many of us play the same game all the time. We may even be in leadership positions as parents, teachers and pastors/priests or heads of governments and enterprises. Action is urgently required and decision-makers are indecisive, hesitant or giving mixed signals. In one Nigerian manufacturing company that I know quite well, the Human Resources Manager always applied to go on leave each time the workers' union threatened to go on strike! *Why do people decide not to decide? Is it even a problem? What can we do about it? Those and more are the issues that we shall attempt to deal with in this week's Bible study.*

The Bible story comes from Paul's running battle with both Jewish and Roman authorities. The Jews were hostile to him; the Romans were afraid of him. As the former tried to tear him apart, in spite of his innocence under their charges, the latter took him into protective custody in Herod's Praetorium at Caesarea [Acts 23: 12-35]. Since Paul was a Roman citizen, the governor, Felix, was determined to give him a fair hearing for 'it is not the custom of the Romans to deliver a man to destruction before the accused meets the accusers face to face, and has opportunity to answer for himself concerning the charge against him' [Acts 25: 16]. So the governor sent for the Jewish leaders to appear before him to make their case against Paul. Let us follow the story from there:

a) *The Jews make a charge of sedition against Paul*

Paul had been in protective custody for five days when the Jewish elders, led by the high priest, Ananias, came to Caesarea. They came with an orator named Tertullus [Acts 24: 1]. Before presenting his accusations against Paul, he poured encomiums on the governor, "seeing that through you we enjoy great peace, and prosperity [in] this nation by your foresight." Then he went on by offering not to bore the governor any further but to speak "few words" [vv. 2-4]. This guy knew how to flatter

people in authority! Tell them what they love to hear and you will have their attention.

Tertullus went on to make the people's case against Paul: they had found him "a plague, a creator of dissension among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ringleader of the sect of the Nazarenes." He charged the governor to examine Paul by himself to ascertain all the things that they had accused him of. The Jewish elders also assented to Tertullus' eloquent presentation [vv. 5-9].

It is interesting to note that Paul's enemies knew how to frame their case to make it justiciable under Roman law. Before the Jewish council, Paul's offence was blasphemy [Acts 22: 22-23], unknown to Roman law. Now, it was sedition, triable under Roman law.

b) Paul defends himself

In defending himself, Paul imitated Tertullus by acknowledging the governor's 'admirable' qualities, such as having "been for many years a judge of this nation." But, interestingly, Paul made his defence on grounds of blasphemy, not sedition which his accusers could never prove on account of his conduct in the temple in Jerusalem or in the synagogues or in the cities [Acts 24: 10-13]. Then he went on to restate his confession of "the Way" which his accusers were calling a sect, even when it was a fulfillment of what had been written "in the Law and in the Prophets." In conclusion, Paul said, "Concerning the resurrection of the dead I am being judged by you this day" [vv. 14-21].

Having heard from both sides, Felix was in a position to decide for or against Paul or even postpone the hearing to a future date when he would pass a judgment. But he did none of those three!

c) But Governor Felix procrastinates!

We are told, "But when Felix heard these things, having more accurate knowledge of the Way, he adjourned the proceedings and said, "When Lysias the commander comes down, I will make a decision on your case." Then he commanded the centurion to keep Paul in custody while granting him the liberty to receive visitors and provisions [vv. 22-23].

There were no further formal hearings thereafter. Some days later, Felix came with his Jewish wife, Drusilla, and brought out Paul to hear more from him about his faith in Christ. As Paul raised issues about righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, the governor became afraid and told Paul, "Go away for now; ***when I have a convenient time I will call for you.***" ***He had also hoped "that money***

would be given him by Paul that he might release him.” So, he sent for Paul every now and then *to converse with him*. After two years, Felix was transferred. Porcius Festus succeeded him and Felix left Paul in jail [vv. 24-27]!

From the foregoing, it is clear that Felix decided not to decide. Was it because he was afraid or that he wanted a bribe to set the prisoner free? There is much more to the matter than meets the eye. Why do people decide not to decide? Let us dig more deeply into the matter.

2. Why people decide not to decide

Among so many possible reasons, the following should be noted why people decide not to decide:

a) *They may need more information or time*

One plausible reason is that we do not as yet have enough information to take a decision for or against. We need more time or more information. For example, when Balak, the king of the Moabites, first sent messengers to Balaam the soothsayer to come and curse the children of Israel that were about to pass through his territory on their way to the Promised Land, the diviner said to them, “Lodge here tonight, and I will bring back word to you, as the LORD speaks to me.” That is neither a ‘yes’ nor a ‘no.’ That night, the LORD told him, “You shall not go with them; you shall not curse the people, for they are blessed.” The following morning, Balaam said to Balak’s messengers, “Go back to your land, for the LORD has refused to give me permission to go with you” [Num. 22:1-13]. With additional information, his decision not to decide turned into a decision not to go.

Therefore, *the decision to procrastinate may be a measure of patience or perseverance to learn and know more about the issue(s) at stake before committing yourself one way or the other. But if additional information will not affect your decision, your indecision becomes a problem.*

b) *Or they are merely passing the buck!*

Some people know what ought to be done but, out of fear or mischief, they avoid taking a decision by passing the buck to somebody else. Some *people avoid risk-taking like a plague*. Some managers love to sign letters of promotion but not queries to erring employees. Some parents pass hard choices to their partners rather than incur unfavourable reactions from their children. Some government leaders would rather blame the opposition than take responsibility for bad performance.

See the game of roulettes² between Pontius Pilate and Herod during the trial of Jesus Christ. When the Jews brought Him before Pilate as the Man from Galilee, he sent Him to Herod the man in charge of that territory who at the time happened to be in Jerusalem on a visit. After treating Jesus with contempt, Pilate sent Him back to Pilate [**Lk 23: 1-11**]. Neither of them appeared bold enough to bell the cat!

Your integrity is on the line when a firm decision is required and you are pretending not to be the one to take it. The buck stops with you. If you do not decide, one way or the other, somebody will soon take your place to do it!

c) *Or they are in a dilemma!*

In our Bible story, governor Felix had enough information to jail Paul or set him free. He feared that setting Paul free would upset the Jews who could make Palestine ungovernable for the Romans. On the other hand, he feared the new Way because he might have heard testimonies from his predecessors about Jesus and His followers. So, because he was in a dilemma, he decided not to decide!

One possible explanation for his action was fear, ***the fear of the consequences of deciding one way or the other***. Sooner than later, Felix was transferred and replaced by another governor, Festus. So, what legacy did he leave behind? It was of a man who decided not to decide! Is that the kind of record you want associated with you? Why should you not be like Meshach, Shadrach and Abed-Nego who boldly told king Nebuchadnezzar that death awaited them, no matter their choice; but they would rather die for God than for the king's idol [**Dan. 3: 16-18**].

d) *Or they may be expecting a bribe!*

Felix, we are told, was expecting Paul to bribe him in order to release him [**Acts 24: 26**]. So, some people may dither or procrastinate so as to buy themselves time to corruptly enrich themselves. Some judges and prosecutors exploit all the technical loopholes to delay a trial so as to make money out of it. In a judicial system without adequate checks and balances, they can get away with it. That is why in some developing countries, you hear of a simple case dragging for over a decade. The people of Israel, for example, refused to allow the sons of Samuel (Joel and Abijah) to succeed him as judges because “they turned aside after dishonest gain, took bribes, and perverted justice” [**1 Sam. 8: 1-3**].

² A gambling game with wheel in which a ball is rolled onto a spinning horizontal wheel divided into compartments, with players betting on which compartment the ball will come to rest in –*Encarta Dictionary (North America)*

There is a variety of reasons why we may decide not to decide. However, from those that we have examined above, none of them is justifiable. ***We can delay. We can re-evaluate. But we must decide one way or the other. It is better to err by making a wrong decision than to not decide at all. History only has a record of heroes and villains; not procrastinators! So, you must decide today what you want history to call you.***

3. Conclusion: Take a stand for Jesus!

Jesus has chosen you to go and bear fruit that remains [**Jn 15: 16**]. But what is your response? You are free to accept or reject His call. Those who have accepted Him have been assured of everlasting life in heaven. Those who have rejected Him are already condemned, awaiting eternal damnation in hell [**Jn 3: 16-17**]. But how about the lukewarm- those who have decided not to decide?

As Jesus told the church of the Laodiceans, you are either hot or cold; but if you are lukewarm, neither hot nor cold, He will spew you out of His mouth [**Rev. 3: 14-16**]. To decide not to decide is to be lukewarm. ***You cannot claim to be a follower of Christ and still live in sin. You must choose. You must decide.***

Stop deciding not to decide. Take a firm stand today, now - for Jesus!