

Equipping Hour: Jan 4

Jan 4: Decision-Making (pt 1)

Just another quick reminder that you can find Equipping Hours notes on the Church Center App as well as the audio recordings for the past couple of months.

A few years ago, I was standing in a coffee shop line behind a college-aged young woman who was clearly wrestling with something. She was on her phone, pacing back and forth, and every few seconds she would stop, stare at the menu, and then start pacing again. Finally, she sighed and said—loud enough for half the line to hear—

“I don’t know. I just don’t know what I want.”

The person on the other end of the phone said something we couldn’t hear, and she immediately replied,

“I know, I know... I just need to listen to my heart.”

She hung up, closed her eyes for a moment, took a deep breath, and then confidently ordered her drink—as if she had just made a major life decision rather than choosing between two lattes.

Everyone laughed a little, including her. She was being silly, yes. But what struck me wasn’t the silliness of the moment—it was the language. “Listen to my heart.” That phrase didn’t need explaining. No one asked what she meant. We all understood exactly what she was saying.

And the truth is, that language doesn’t stay in coffee shops, and it certainly doesn’t stay within the bounds of silliness. We use it when we talk about careers, relationships, parenting decisions, financial choices, and even moral questions. We say things like, “It just didn’t feel right,” or “I had peace about it,” or “I needed to do what was right for me.”

What’s interesting is that most of us didn’t sit down one day and decide, “This is how I’m going to make decisions.” We absorbed it. From movies, from counseling language, from social media, from stories where the hero succeeds by trusting her inner voice. So before we examine a biblical view of decision-making, it’s worth asking a simpler question first: What have you already been taught—often without realizing it—about how decisions are supposed to be made?

That’s where we’re going to start today. Over the next three weeks, we’re going to talk about decision-making—something every one of us does every day, whether we realize it or not. Big decisions, small decisions, life-altering ones, and ordinary ones. This morning, like the rest of our topical worldview series since September, is intentionally different from what you might expect in a Sunday School class. Today, we are not starting with the Bible. That’s not because Scripture is unimportant—quite the opposite. But before we talk about how

Christians are called to make decisions and orient their lives, it's important that we clearly understand the default framework many of us have absorbed simply by living in our age and culture.

Today's goal is to reveal how worldly messages and influences have impacted your decision-making process. Many of us—often without realizing it—borrow heavily from these ideas when we make choices. So today we're asking:

How does our culture tell us to make decisions absent of God?

In order to answer this question, we need to start by looking at some basic, or core assumptions at the heart of decision-making. As a refresher and for those who are newer to this class, basic assumptions at the heart-level are what we call worldview. Worldview is the deepest layer of culture. And what is culture?

Culture

- a people's way of life
- their design for living
- their way of coping with their biological, physical, and social environment
- The “power” that keeps people following their cultural script is something inside of people – the power of habit (hear that as the power of conformity). Culture has no power in and of itself. People regularly modify old customs and create new ones. The pressure to conform to these habits comes from the society, the people who ascribe to these normative habits.

Where does this begin?

- Worldview
 - not separate from culture but is included as the deepest level of presuppositions, or basic assumptions, upon which people base their lives
 - a presupposition is something you take for granted as real or true
 - generally not questions you sit around and ponder in your free time (unless you have lots of free time like a philosopher or a pastor)
 - Who are you?
 - Where did you come from?
 - Is there anyone or anything else occupying reality?
 - Is all I see all there really is?
 - Is right now the only time that is important, or do events in the past, and the future, significantly impact my present experience?
 - Every culture assumes specific answers to these questions, and those answers control and integrate every function, aspect, and component of culture
 - It's the lens by which one assess and makes sense of the world

Culture Layers

- Behavior – what is done
- Values – what is good or best
- Beliefs – what is true
- Worldview – what is real

We form answers to these questions based on experiences and the messages we absorb throughout life, and these messages become our core assumptions, our basic assumptions for making sense of life. Our worldview informs our beliefs, our beliefs inform our values, and our values are ultimately revealed in our behavior. If you want to know why you are stuck doing behavior you as a believer want to quit, then you want to examine your values, beliefs, and ultimately your worldview, the reality you embrace by faith, to see where the disconnect lies.

When Romans 12:2 challenges us to be transformed by the renewing of our minds, it means confronting our worldview to see how it is, or is not, aligned with God's Word and His way. When God is not a part of your worldview, the following core assumptions will exist when it comes to decision-making.

Core assumptions of secular decision-making.

First, the individual is the highest authority. In this framework, self becomes the final decision-maker. No external authority—religious, moral, or divine—has the final word. The guiding question becomes: What do I think is right for me? Remember that “right” and “good” are value judgments revealing worldview. As you practice listening for worldview, you’ll soon realize people give away their motivations pretty freely based on their priorities and values.

Since the individual is the highest authority, this means that second, there is no appeal to a transcendent moral authority. Right and wrong are not received; they are constructed. Think about that statement for a second. Without a moral Lawgiver, right and wrong are not received from highest authority; they are subjectively constructed. Which means moral guidance and decisions comes from personal values, acquired preferences, social norms, or practical outcomes rather than revelation, rather than divinely mandated. This is why we resumed our worldview series back in September by challenging our influences and “teachers” because of the messages we have embraced to construct our worldview.

And third, happiness and fulfillment are the primary goals. Good decisions are those that increase satisfaction, inner peace, or self-actualization. A “good life” is defined by personal well-being rather than faithfulness to something beyond the self. These assumptions shape much of the advice we hear—often so commonly that we don’t even recognize them as assumptions anymore. Things get muddy when we argue the values behind our behaviors without going deeper. For instance, let’s pretend I attend climate change protests, and I can

defend my behavior because of my values. I value protecting us from extreme weather conditions and rising sea levels. I value the polar bears. But defending behavior based on values misses the bigger, deeper picture, because values are formed by beliefs, and beliefs, at the deepest level, come from the reality we have embraced, our worldview. If you spend even a little time watching on-the-ground independent reporters ask protestors questions poking at beliefs and worldview, they fumble. They can't answer. Why? Because a life guided solely by values has no anchor beyond self.

It's important to note that as of early 2025, a Gallup Poll revealed that adult Americans have reached a near historic low on a survey of happiness and satisfaction, so it seems for many there is a disconnect. Which kind of begs the question, why does our culture trust itself so much? Where does this come from? For that we need to take a quick look at The Philosophical Roots of Secular Decision-Making. Don't worry, I will make this as painless as possible since philosophy probably isn't what you want to do first thing in the morning. If ever. Unless you're weird like me.

Before we talk about methods—pros and cons lists, listening to feelings, or seeking advice—it's important to understand why our culture trusts those basic, core assumptions in the first place. Behind modern secular decision-making are several deep philosophical streams. Most people have never studied them or considered them since they first learned of them, but almost everyone lives in them. Think of these philosophies like underground springs. You don't see them, but they feed the river of how our culture thinks about choice, freedom, and meaning.

The first is Rationalism: "If I Think Clearly Enough, I Can Choose Well"

One of the strongest influences on modern decision-making comes from the Enlightenment, particularly in the 17th and 18th centuries. During this time, confidence in human reason surged. The core idea was simple and powerful: Human beings are capable of understanding the world through reason alone. If we gather enough information and think carefully, we can arrive at good and responsible decisions without the need of transcendent moral authority, meaning without God.

In this framework:

- Reason becomes the primary authority
- Clear thinking is seen as morally responsible
- Good decisions are logical decisions

This is where we get much of our modern trust in analysis. When faced with a difficult choice, we are taught to slow down, collect facts, list options, and weigh consequences. If something goes wrong, the assumption is often that we didn't think hard enough or didn't have enough information. There is a quiet (and sometimes loud) optimism here about human capability. While emotions are acknowledged, they are often viewed as something to manage or regulate so that rational thinking can prevail. This rationale has highly

informed many secular psychological theories. The ideal decision-maker in this view is calm, objective, informed, and in control.

Second is Utilitarianism: “The Right Choice Is the One That Works Best”

This major philosophical influence evaluates decisions based on outcomes. Rather than asking, Is this right or wrong in itself? utilitarianism asks, What will produce the most benefit or the least harm? Here outcomes-based practicality is the highest ideal rather than rational decision-making.

In this framework:

- The moral value of a decision is measured by its results
- Intentions matter less than consequences
- Moral absolutes are flexible if the desired results are met

This way of thinking is incredibly common today, especially in discussions about ethics, policy, and even personal choices. We hear phrases like:

- “No one gets hurt”
- “It seemed like the best option available”
- “I did what worked”

Utilitarian thinking is pragmatic and forward-looking. It values efficiency and effectiveness. It is especially appealing in complex situations where every option involves trade-offs. For instance, Big Pharma companies add “provisional,” not publicly disclosed dollars to their budgets to cover FDA fines and lawsuits to the tune of 2-3 billion dollars each year. When your budget is 20-30 billion dollars a year, this 10% built in to pay for fines is a prime example of utilitarian thinking.

The challenge, though, is that outcomes are not always predictable. And what counts as “good” can differ greatly depending on who is evaluating the results and is therefore completely subjective. This framework powerfully shapes modern decision-making by teaching people to ask: Does this choice deliver the outcome I want?

A third major philosophical camp is Existentialism: “I Must Create Meaning Through My Choices”

This way of thinking has deeply influenced modern ideas about identity, freedom, and social justice. Existentialism begins with a stark assumption: There is no given meaning to life. No built-in purpose. No objective script to follow.

In this view:

- Meaning is created, not discovered
- Identity is formed through choices
- Responsibility for ascribing meaning rests on the person

Decisions, then, are not just practical—they are identity-forming. Every choice is a declaration of who you are and what you value. This philosophy places enormous weight on personal freedom. To choose authentically—to act in a way that feels true to oneself—is considered a moral good. To choose to go against one's true self is to live inauthentically and is therefore morally wrong. Build your own morality, essentially. The worst failure, in this framework, is not making the wrong choice but living in bad faith—allowing others, traditions, or institutions to define your life for you rather than you being you, boo. This is why modern culture often frames decision-making as a quest for authenticity. The question isn't just, What should I do? but rather Who am I becoming by doing this?

Fourth is Expressive Individualism: “My Inner Self Is My Moral Compass”

This particularly stream flows out of existentialism, is a branch of existentialism, and teaches that the truest and most authoritative part of a person is found within. This is the Disney Model for Decision-Making, and it's one of the most powerful decision-making messages in our culture today. What's that message? It's where we began this morning: follow your heart.

This idea shows up everywhere—not just in Disney but almost all popular storytelling. The message is simple and compelling: Your heart knows who you truly are. Trust it. Be brave enough to listen to it. As such, identity becomes internal, personal, and self-defined. We see this particular philosophy running rampant in the secular world of counseling and therapy.

These stories we pump wholesale into the formative minds of our children, for decades now, have created a cultural ethos where authority figures and traditions are often obstacles. Take a few minutes and think about kid's movies in the past thirty years that perpetuate this message: true freedom comes when you reject imposed roles and listens to your inner voice. Happiness is found through self-expression. The heart, in this framework, is assumed to be fundamentally good. Suppressing desire is harmful. Authenticity becomes a moral virtue. Many of us have grown up swimming in this message long before we ever consciously evaluated it, and a direct result is the gender ideology running rampant in our society today.

In expressive individualism:

- The inner self is considered good and trustworthy
- External constraints are viewed with suspicion
- Moral authority moves inward

Decision-making, then, becomes an act of self-expression. Ever seen a mother affirm her tantrum-throwing five year old, encouraging him to express his authentic self? I have. I've even seen childcare workers and pre-school teachers do this. That's what this is. Those children are being taught that to go against your inner desires or feelings is seen as harmful

Equipping Hour: Jan 4

or even dishonest because they are being taught to express their individualism, which means feelings are elevated to the status of supreme authority. Fulfillment comes from aligning outward choices with inward feelings. This philosophy explains why modern advice often emphasizes listening to yourself, trusting your instincts, and honoring your truth.

This is important, so please hear this: It also explains why disagreement and conflict is often internalized and interpreted as invalidation—because to challenge a decision is to challenge someone's identity, challenge their authentic self. Stew in that for a second. You disagreeing with me equals you invalidating me as a person, so you'd better either agree with me or shut up. People who have embraced this decision-making matrix, this philosophy, do not have the tools, emotional wherewithal, or foundational capacity to be okay when someone disagrees with their choices and are absolutely wrecked and shattered when conflicting opinions arise. They are often disparaged as "snowflakes," but the truth is far darker than the fact they come across as easily offended or weak. What is the truth? They have fully succumbed to narcissism, to the worship of self, because authenticity, being authentic to your heart and feelings, is not just encouraged; it is moralized into being your identity.

Folks, in a very real sense, and I don't say this to be dramatic, but in a very real sense, we, the Church, are losing this particular battle for the hearts and minds of the past two or three generations. Why? Perhaps it's ignorance. We don't know or we don't see. Perhaps we are too afraid to speak up, too afraid to disciple our children, too afraid to say enough is enough. Or perhaps we have let the world disciple our children instead of ourselves. Folks, this is, or should be, a gut check for us.

It's important to see that these philosophies don't really operate separately. In modern secular decision-making, in our culture, they blend together.

You are encouraged to:

- Think rationally (Enlightenment)
- Aim for beneficial outcomes (utilitarianism)
- Choose authentically (existentialism)
- Express your true inner self (expressive individualism)

The result is a decision-making framework that aims to be reasonable, compassionate, and empowering—while also placing tremendous authority and responsibility on the individual.

You are expected to:

- Know yourself
- Trust yourself
- Define your values
- Live consistently with them
- Accept the outcomes

Before we move on, it's worth pausing and asking—as a critique and as an observation: How many of these ideas feel familiar? How many of them sound like the advice you've received—or even given? These philosophies didn't stay in classrooms or textbooks or animated kids movies. They are the messages that shaped the air we breathe. And understanding them helps us better understand why decision-making feels so heavy in our culture today and forces us to ask ourselves how we have become ensnared by them.

We see this very clearly in the secular world of counseling and therapeutic guidance, so let's talk about that for a few minutes. Here, the primary concern is psychological well-being. Decisions are evaluated by how they affect “mental health.” The guiding question often becomes: What feels healthiest for me right now?

One common way to evaluate this health is values clarification. Individuals are encouraged to identify their personal values and then make decisions that align with those values. Importantly, write this down, in this secular paradigm the values themselves are not judged as right or wrong—only whether a person is being consistent. But as we know, values are determined by our beliefs, and our beliefs are informed the reality we have embraced within our worldview hearts, which means a secular approach to counseling and guidance will miss impacting a person's worldview at the deepest level.

There is also a strong emphasis on self-care and boundaries. Protecting emotional energy is seen as essential. Relationships or responsibilities that cause distress may be reduced or eliminated in the name of wellness. Twenty years ago an employ would never take a “mental health day” off from work, or at least it wouldn't be called this, but today that's not only normalized but even celebrated because the person taking the day off is practicing self-care as an expression of self-empowerment.

Finally, inner peace and emotional alignment play a major role for secular approaches to guidance. Feelings are treated as trustworthy signals. That's kind of important, mind you, and really emphasizes just how subjective this all really is. Discomfort suggests a wrong choice; peace suggests a right one. In this framework, emotions are not just part of decision-making—they often become the deciding factor.

V. Tools Used in Secular Decision-Making

Practically speaking, secular decision-making relies on a range of tools that many of us use regularly:

- Pros and cons lists
- Cost-benefit analysis
- Risk assessment
- Personality tests and strength assessments
- Visualizing your future self and asking, “Will I regret this?”
- Seeking advice from peers, mentors, or professionals.
- Learning by trial and error.

On the surface, none of these tools are inherently wrong, and in fact several of them, with the right foundation, are essential in biblical decision-making. These tools exist to hopefully help individuals make thoughtful, informed choices.

At the same time, a secular framework for decision-making carries significant tensions. For instance: Feelings can change. Values can conflict—both within us and between people. Outcomes are unpredictable. When something goes wrong, the weight of the decision rests entirely on the individual, which means identity is fragile. And perhaps most significantly, when the self is the final authority, the self also bears the full burden of being right.

Let me leave you with a question—something to sit in for a moment:

If decision-making begins and ends with the self, what happens when the self is uncertain, divided, or wrong?

That question sets the stage for where we'll go next week, when we turn to Scripture and ask how God reframes decision-making—not by beginning with the self, but by beginning with His Word to reveal His character, wisdom, and purposes. Next week, we'll build a biblical framework for decision-making together, so be sure to come back.