The Danger of Impulsive Decisions

By Dennis Pollock

As we consider the importance of making good decisions, we would do well to give thought to a source of many terrible decisions: the tendency to be impulsive. The word "impulsive" comes from the word "impulse" and it refers to actions done or commitments made quickly with very little thought or planning behind them. In such cases there is almost no time gap between when an idea occurs to you and the point at which you carry it out.

Ideas and various urges are continually presenting themselves to our minds. Normally time, thought, research, advice, and the Scriptures are filters we use to separate the good ideas from the bad ones. Nearly all of us have at times, however, bypassed the usual filters and acted on impulse. The idea seemed so great, the urge so strong, and the rightness of the proposal so self-evident, we immediately jumped feet-first into the waters. At times we seem to get away with this, but often we pay a heavy price.

One of the marks of maturity is the recognition that just because an idea seems right and feels exciting the moment we first conceive it, this is not necessarily a green light to immediately pursue that particular course of action. Essentially this is a healthy self-distrust. Mature people learn over time that their first impressions are not always right, their strongest instincts cannot always be trusted, and their deepest passions must not always be followed. Time, thought, and prayer are of great value in stripping the golden veneer from the appealing enticements of the evil one.

Dangers of Haste

Very little good is said about haste in the Bible. Haste is generally an expression of the lack of faith. In Isaiah we read: "Behold, I lay in Zion a stone for a foundation, a tried stone, a precious cornerstone, a sure foundation; whoever believes will not act hastily" (Isaiah 28:16). Rushed, frazzled, nervous people are not people of faith. When you always have to act immediately, you reveal an illusion that everything depends upon you. "If I don't act soon, my whole life will fall apart. If I don't move now, I lose everything." Such an attitude suggests you have zero faith that God has the ability to hold your blessing in place for you. You think that blessing is so fragile, so fleeting, and so transitory that only by the greatest haste will you be able to lay hold of it. Otherwise it will soon be gone and you'll be out of luck. God says, "whoever believes will not act hastily."

Proverbs tells us, "he sins who hastens with his feet" (Proverbs 19:2). Failing to seek the mind of God when you are faced with major decisions is both foolish and sinful. Man lives by "every word that proceeds from the mouth of God," and God normally takes His time in speaking to us and making His will clear. His voice and His will are worth waiting for.

The ungodly do not feel the need to run things past God. Getting what they want is their concern, and the sooner the better. When we live under the Lordship of Jesus Christ, there is a higher standard and a far greater concern than simply what we desire or enjoy. Our primary concern is: "What does He want?" Remember when you were children and someone asked you to stay over at their house for the night, or to go with them to a football game, or spend a Saturday at the beach? There is one line we all repeated countless times throughout those early years, whenever a friend was asking us to do something out of the ordinary. The line was: "I'll have to ask my parents." We knew in those days that we couldn't make those decisions on our own. We would need to get an OK from Mom and Dad. How carefully we presented our requests and how eagerly we waited to see an approving nod of the head or hear those wonderful words, "I guess it'll be OK."

Then we reached adulthood, moved out of the house into our own place, and we stopped asking. We had outgrown the need for permission. As children of the most high God through faith in Jesus Christ, we will never outgrow the need to ask our Heavenly Father His permission and approval on the plans, ideas, and proposed decisions that run through our heads. Whether a new Christian at the age of twenty, or an elderly saint who has
walked with the Lord for the last fifty years, we need to hear from Him. And one of the best ways to hear His voice and receive His permission (or veto, as the case may be) is to give Him time to speak and ourselves time to think and pray. To wait on God for confirmation is to honor Him, and the Bible says that those who honor God, He will honor. If we have invited guests over for dinner, and when they are five minutes late, we immediately start to eat, we dishonor our friends. When they arrive and we are starting our dessert, we feel a sense of shame. We cared so little for these people that we could not wait for them. So it is with all who live by their impulses, acting hastily, making poor choices, and never taking the time to wait to hear the voice of the One who is perfect wisdom.

In Proverbs 7 we read of an immoral woman tempting a young man into sexual immorality. The Bible says: "Immediately he went after her, as an ox goes to the slaughter, or as a fool to the correction of the stocks, till an arrow struck his liver. As a bird hastens to the snare, He did not know it would cost his life" (Proverbs 7:22,23). Notice the words "immediately" and "hastens." The young man follows the woman immediately the way a bird hastens to a snare. Both the young man rushing toward the bed of adultery and the bird rushing into a snare are in a terrible hurry. The prize is in view, their lusts have taken over, and they are moving with the greatest speed toward their own destruction. The Bible says of the young man, "He did not know that it would cost his life." He didn't take the time to think about it. His ignorance and his haste went hand in hand. Hasty people are often ignorant and ignorant people are often hasty.

**Take time to consider**

In direct opposition to haste we have the word consider. To consider is defined as: "to think carefully about something, typically before making a decision." In Proverbs 28 we are told: "A man with an evil eye hastens after riches, and does not consider that poverty will come upon him" (Proverbs 28:22). Evil men hurry after riches; they lie, cheat, steal, walk all over people, and do whatever they can to be as rich as they can as fast as they can. The Bible says that such a person "does not consider." The hallmark of the hasty is a failure to recognize or think about the consequences of their actions. This is not only true with downright evil behavior, but with stupid behavior as well. Some people are not so much evil as they are foolish. They make terrible decisions with barely the blink of an eye. They take five seconds to make a decision that will cost them five years to undoe the damage it causes. They do not consider.

Jesus said, "What king, going to make war against another king, does not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand?" (Luke 14:31). The reasonable thing to do before committing yourself to anything, whether becoming a Christian, marrying a wife or a husband, starting a business, or enlisting in the army, is to consider if you are willing to follow it through to the end. Those who would profess Christ and claim to be His disciples need to consider whether they are willing to make Jesus the supreme love of their lives. It is relatively easy to get a man to pray a short prayer to ask Jesus to save him from hell, so that he can go to heaven and live forever. But sadly many do this with no intention whatever of following Jesus or obeying Him. When difficulties arise or they suddenly realize there is a price to be paid to be a disciple of Jesus, they quickly fall away. They should have first sat down and considered.

The opposite of acting impulsively is the highly recommended practice of waiting upon the Lord. In Psalms it says, "Wait on the LORD; Be of good courage, and He shall strengthen your heart; wait, I say, on the LORD" (Psalm 27:14). To wait simply means to allow time to pass. Allow some time between when you first conceive an idea and you take steps to implement it. In some ways waiting is about the easiest thing we will ever do. You don't have to be smart to wait, you don't have to have a college degree to wait, it doesn't require an attractive personality or good looks, or any athletic ability to wait. All you have to do is... well, wait. Let some time pass. Allow some days to go by. Don’t act immediately.

And yet from another perspective waiting is one of the most difficult things we ever do. We are all born with an instinct for survival which tells us that whenever there is a problem, whenever there is a desperate need, or whenever there is a chance for us to obtain some great desire, we must act immediately. Act before anyone else, get there ahead of everyone else, and by all means don't let any grass grow under your feet. For those who
belong to Christ, waiting on the Lord is a normal aspect of the Christian life. We will have many opportunities to practice waiting on God from our earliest days in Christ to our old age. We wait for His wisdom; we wait for Him to open doors for us; we wait for answers to prayer; we wait for His timing… Impulsive, hasty people know nothing of this waiting. For them it is always now, now, now.

One major reason that impulsive decisions usually work out so poorly is that the flesh is louder and pushier than the Spirit. Often when you are considering two alternatives, the first voice you will hear will be that of the flesh. The Bible tells us, "The flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; and these are contrary to one another" (Galatians 5:17). Your flesh is demanding and loud. He will make his demands known to you in no subtle terms. Elijah experienced a strong wind, then an earthquake, and then a fire. But the Bible says the Lord was not in any of these. Then he heard a still, small voice, which was the voice of the Lord.

Peter writes, "Beloved, I beg you as sojourners and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts which war against the soul…" (1 Peter 2:11). He does not say you will never experience fleshly lusts. He does not say you will live in such a place of anointing and heavenly bliss that bad ideas and wicked suggestions will never enter your head. He says we must abstain from these lusts. Powerful desires can interfere with right thinking. The passage of time gives those desires an opportunity to cool, and allows reason and spiritual insight to take over.

Crucified with Christ

There is a very solid Biblical reason why Christians can expect to build up a track record of excellent and wise decisions. Paul writes to the Romans, "…our old man was crucified with (Christ), that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves of sin" (Romans 6:6). Here is our deliverance from foolish, impulsive, disastrous decisions. Here is the reason we can expect to choose wisely. Christ has put to death our fleshly nature, not in the sense of annihilating it, but in the sense of rendering it impotent. By abiding in Jesus, and through the power of the Holy Spirit we can wait, we can consider, and we can choose wisely. Some people are naturally more impulsive than others, but every true believer in Christ has the promise of victory over the flesh and its impulsive, demanding nature. Making wise choices is a part of our inheritance in Jesus Christ, who has been made by God to be wisdom for us.