

PLANNING PRAYERFULLY

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“As a Christian, how do I balance two seemingly conflicting realities, dependence upon God’s direction on the one hand, and detailed planning on the other?” The question was asked by a Financial Planner who devotes his considerable talents to helping others make long range plans for financial security, but it is one we have heard many times. The questioner is convinced of the necessity to plan wisely, but he is also mindful of the sentiment expressed on a bumper sticker we saw some time ago: “Man plans; God laughs.”

That life is filled with uncertainty is no surprise to anyone, regardless of their religious outlook. Entire industries are built on offering solutions to the vicissitudes of life. If you’ve unexpectedly lost your job, see a re-employment counsellor. If you think heart disease or cancer or sudden accident may cause loss of income and astronomical medical bills, buy disability insurance. If you want to reduce the possibility of losing your hard-earned savings, diversify your investments. The means that humans have devised for dealing with the unforeseen and the unanticipated are as creative and endless as the uncertainties themselves. It would be a foolish person indeed who did not spend at least some time planning for uncertainty.

Jesus affirmed the necessity for planning in some of his teachings. The wise man, he said, built his house on solid rock, where it could withstand rain and wind and flood. The foolish man built his house on sand, and it quickly was washed away. There is no suggestion that Jesus was extolling the virtues of the man who did not plan for the vagaries of nature.

The man who wants to build a tall structure, said Jesus, will be well advised to first sit down and estimate the cost, so he won't run out of money and be the laughingstock of his community. And a king who is contemplating war with another king should first consider whether his 10,000 soldiers can overcome the opposing 20,000. If they can't, he should quickly seek terms of peace.

The wisdom of planning is clearly evident in all of these examples.

But the question our friend was asking was not about the uncertainties of life. It was about being a servant of God on a daily basis. Where does one's dependence on one's own knowledge, skill, and talent end, and one's willingness to be responsive to God's direction begin? Put another way, how can one be prepared while at the same time travel light? We mere mortals cannot fully see the future and what God wants us to do and where He wants to use us, so how can we be responsive and responsible at the same time?

The answer lies in planning prayerfully.

No reliable employee would communicate with his boss only at the beginning of a project, then go blithely on making plans, spending resources, and implementing his notion of what the boss had in mind with no further reference to her. The wise employee understands that continual communication is essential if plans are to be realistically implemented. Situations, circumstances, and many factors in the decision-making environment change, sometimes at lightning speed, and plans need to be adapted, modified, and sometimes scrapped entirely. We understand all that in earthly terms.

But somehow we have the idea that things are different in the heavenly or spiritual realm. Where did we ever get the notion that God doesn't want to hear from us in the period between our birth and our death? He has plans for our lives; there is a reason why we were born. He has plans for the impact He wishes to have through us: on other people, on historical events, on business and commerce and in the not-for-profit sector. God is

not indifferent to His creation; He is not indifferent to daily life; and He is not indifferent to how and where and when we use our talents and skills and personalities. In other words, God is every bit as present and real as the most persistent and pervasive of earthly bosses. For us to make plans without reference to Him makes as much sense as planning without reference to our boss or our family or our financial and other resources. And plans made without reference to Him are as likely to run amok as are plans made without reference to earthly considerations.

But how do we include God in our plans? Once again, the answer is, through prayerful planning.

Prayer is the means by which we communicate with God, and God communicates with us. Just as with human conversation, prayer is not one-way communication. It is not us laying our plans out before God and asking for His unconditional blessing on them. It is dialogue, listening as well as talking. There's an old adage that since God gave us two ears and one mouth we should listen twice as much as we talk. If that applies in earthly terms, how much more do we need to apply it with reference to God. It would be foolish of us when making our plans to ignore the advice of a consultant or friend or colleague who could see farther, think smarter, and knew more about the situation than we do. God is all-seeing, all-knowing, all-wise; we would do well to consult with Him, listen to Him, heed His instructions in all things we plan and do.

We need to lay our plans before God, from the earliest glimmer in our eye to the final step in implementation. We do this by consciously inviting Him to be part of our thought process, our conversations, our designs and 'blueprints' (whether the blueprints are three dimensional or only in our minds). More than inviting Him, we need to actively seek His guidance. God has a consistent and unique way of making Himself known to each person who seeks Him. For a few, He speaks audibly; for others, He speaks through dreams; for still others, He speaks through thoughts and ideas that bear His unmistakable stamp. By looking back over our lives at times when we were certain of God's presence we can identify the methods He uses with us. The point is, He will make His desires and

direction known to those who actively seek Him. He will open doors He wants us to go through, and He will close others. By prayerfully seeking His guidance and direction, we can know with confidence those plans that come from Him. He will give us the courage and resources and determination to make those plans come to fruition.

But be certain of this: if you seek His guidance then attempt to implement your own plan, you'll be shipwrecked.

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