



126: Being Consistent Is Not The Goal

I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 126.

This is a podcast about making decisions but also about making a life. If you struggle with decision fatigue, chronic hesitation, or just need a few minutes away from the constant stream of information and the sometimes delightful but also distracting hum of entertainment, you're in the right place. I'll bring you a thoughtful story, a little prayer, and as simple next right step.

We've heard it said, I've said it here, that adults make over 35,000 decisions every single day, and while in the days of a global pandemic, our decisions might look different, I don't think they're necessarily any less of them. However, we are having to make them with less awareness of what's going to happen next, with less dependence on a predictable life rhythm, and, in general, with less solid information. It's no wonder our daily decisions feel so hard.

Should we clean or rest? Watch the news or avoid it? Be strict with the kids or lighten up? Should we use this time to be productive or to take a break? Work hard or calm down? See friends from a safe social distance or not see them at all? Celebrate now or wait for when we can all gather?

What is our next right thing? And how can we know? That's today's episode. Listen in.

It was January 2015, and I was one of 20 or so authors invited to California to be part of a conversation about spiritual formation and the next generation. It was an honor to be included, and it was a delight to attend. One of the highlights for me was it was the first time I had the honor of meeting Jane Willard.

Jane is a licensed marriage and family therapist and a certified spiritual director. When she walks into a room, she brings the peace of the presence of God. Jane is also the wife of Dallas Willard who taught and lived the teachings of Christ until the day he died in 2013. He's an author I quote in this podcast, maybe more than any other author, so of course I was really looking forward to getting to meet Jane.

Over the course of the few days we all had together in Southern California, between meals and round table discussions about formation and publishing, we also had the opportunity to sign up to meet with one of the spiritual directors present, and I chose a 30-minute time slot with Jane.

Looking back, I'll admit that I'm embarrassed about what I chose to talk with her about, but there I was

five years into this authoring book business, getting ready to launch my fourth book that year, later that year, and balancing lots of decisions and invitations. And so as I sat outside on patio chair across the table from Jane Willard, I didn't ask her about Dallas, about Jesus or about the Bible. Instead, y'all, I asked her about scheduling. I asked her, how can I know what to say yes to and what to say no to? How can I discern which events are a fit for me to speak at and which ones aren't?

Looking back, I realized how profound that question actually was for me. I didn't know then how interwoven my vocation would become with that question. Basically, I was asking how can I know for sure what to do next? What's my next right thing?

Well, it was a lovely conversation with Jane, and she was kind and patient with me, and I'm ever grateful for her attentive presence to this very day. One thing I took away from that conversation that we had, it's been over five years now, is one thing I hope you'll also remember. It was not a clear answer to how to know what to say yes and no to, but it was actually another question. She asked me, why do you feel the need to decide this once and for all? Her question was a curious one for me. I don't think I was able to answer it right there in her presence, but that wasn't the point anyway.

So I carried the question with me, and I dared myself to be honest. I realized I had this idea that professional speakers had very organized and precise ways of planning out their schedule. I thought in order to eliminate the uncomfortable feelings of indecision and doubt, I just needed to make one decision for all time. That was my answer. If I could just have a system, a rubric, a plan, I would be settled. I would be professional, and I would not have so many questions about this work, about my priorities, and about my life. And if I was really honest, I would have said that if I was an author who could finally have some confidence about my yeses and my nos, then I would finally be okay. That was the secret.

Do you see how deeply connected our daily decisions are to our inner life and identity?

Hear me say this, it is a lovely thing to have a plan, to have a system, and to implement it for seamless decision making and side note, to be honest, now five years later, I actually do have a loose kind of rubric for saying yes and no to speaking engagements, which is kind of ironic during a pandemic when I'm not getting any, but we'll talk about that later.

The issue isn't whether or not it's right or wrong to have a system. The issue is what power and authority am I giving the system during these right now moments of my life. Do I equate having a system for responding to speaking requests with my ability to be okay? Or, let's bring it to other areas, do I measure my worth as a mom by how late I let my teenagers sleep in the morning? And do I silently scold myself for being inconsistent if I wake them early one day and then let them sleep next?

Do I pass judgment on myself for hesitating over the simplest decisions about what color photo box should I order on Amazon? Or what should we make tonight for dinner? Am I slipping into shame because small decisions feel real hard right now because I keep setting work goals that I can't meet because I'm not as productive as I used to be? Do I cast blame and become easily frustrated because the plan I had for

our schedule this week flew out the window by lunch on Monday?

Jane's question comes back to mind. Why do you feel the need to make this decision once and for all?

On that warm January, California day, five years ago, Jane was inviting me into a next right thing mindset. Sometimes you can decide once and for all. For example, I only buy mugs that are black, white, or black and white. Done. I only paint my nails one of two colors, white in the summer, black in the winter. And since we're on this theme, if I'm painting a wall or anything in my house and I'm going to choose the colors, black or white, if you've ever been to a paint store, you know there's no such thing as black or white. There's a million shades of black and just as many shades of white. So I made my decision a long time ago. My favorite black is Tricorn Black. My favorite white is Alabaster White, decision made.

Those are literally my black and white decisions, but most decisions aren't black and white, even the ones you make over and over again every single day. Many of our decisions, especially right now, depend on people, moods, timing, personality, giftedness, money, means, capacity, and even the weather.

As parents, we're taught to be consistent and we think that means create the rules and stick to them. Make decisions once and follow through. And of course sometimes it does mean that, but having a good system is not equal to living a good life. Doing the next right thing isn't about creating the next right week-long schedule or establishing a predictable routine for toddlers that will work every single day of your quarantine life. No. Doing your next right thing is an invitation into this next moment that may look exactly like the one before, but you will arrive to it with different energy and that requires potentially a different decision.

Consistency is not your God. Let's return to the actual basics. No matter if you are under stay-at-home orders or if you leave your house every day as an essential worker, the potential for decision fatigue remains for all of us. Instead of asking, how should I be spending this time of quarantine? Maybe we can ask ourselves, how could I spend the next 10 minutes?

You don't have to make a global decision about everything. Let every moment be an invitation. Let each decision be an opportunity to listen. This could be crazy-making, but it doesn't have to be.

As you pay attention to your body, the time of day, your family and the weather, your answer that might change. In the morning, it might be a yes. By the evening, it could be a no. This doesn't have to mean you're irresponsible or inconsistent. It simply means you're a human person living your multifaceted life in the unshakable kingdom of God.

There is no right way. There is only right now. The kingdom remains unshakeable, and we are free to relax within it. We can make good decisions for our family and for ourselves as each moment comes. And if it feels daunting to not have a plan to stick to, here's a question that you can ask yourself that I learned from a teacher of mine, Jane Johnson. She simply says, ask God, what do I need to know about blank?" And this has become my next right thing prayer. This morning, you may be super productive, and tomorrow morning, you might take an extra nap. Tonight the kids might stay up late for a movie, and tomorrow, you might realize that was a terrible idea. A decision that fits this afternoon might not fit an hour later and that's okay. Just be here now.

Release the shame that comes with your own perceived inconsistency. Stop looking for blanket solutions. Ask God what you need to know about your current situation and then simply do the next right thing in love.

Thanks for listening to episode 126 of The Next Right Thing. I hope this simple practice of returning to the basics can be just one more rung on the trellis upon which your rhythm of life can continue to grow because it's true. This is a podcast about making decisions. The bigger truth is that our daily decisions are actually making our lives.

As always. You can find me at @emilypfreeman on Instagram or online at emilypfreeman.com. It's a joy and an honor to bring you new episodes every week, and like I said before, to be honest, during these last several months now, it's been sanity keeping for me. So I personally thank you for being a part of that.

Doing the next right thing isn't something I just say. It's not just the title of this podcast, the title of book, or the title of Princess Anna's song in Frozen II. This next right thing posture and mindset really is saving my life, and I hope for you during this time, especially that just returning to the, of asking myself, what do I need to know about this decision right now?

And even if I don't have a clear answer, just doing the next right thing in love. Maybe it's heating up the coffee, maybe it's taking a short walk. I don't know what it is for you, but I hope these words serve as a kind companion for you as you continue to figure it out.

In closing, a few simple words from Madeleine L'Engle in her book, *A Wind in the Door*:

We don't have to know everything at once. We just do one thing at a time as it has given us to do.

Thanks for listening and I'll see you next time.