



111: Never Believe Anything Bad About God

I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 111. This is a podcast about making decisions but also about making a life. Many of the decisions we make are second nature. Well, I'm here for the ones that aren't. Some of the choices we have to make in life are just flat out difficult. Others we think should be easy, but for some reason they trip us up. We all want to make our choices with wisdom, courage, and discernment. Weekly, we talk here about one way to do that well, and today's no different. In fact, here at the beginning of the new year, it seemed fitting to come back home to one of the most foundational truths I hold onto when making my own decisions. On the surface it may not sound like it has to do with decision making at all, but well, it does. Listen in.

Author, teacher and philosopher Dallas Willard said six words that have changed the way I make decisions. You may already know what those six words are, but first a bit of context. I consider it a gift that I grew up hearing about the goodness of God. My mom taught us when we were very small that God loves us and he's good. Over the course of my life, I confess, I've doubted certain things about God and his character, mainly about his provision, his timing, and sometimes his trustworthiness, but I would never say I doubted his goodness.

You might think I'm contradicting myself and I probably am, but I'm just telling you how it's looked from where I sit. Your story is I'm sure quite different from mine, or maybe you can also relate with knowing or thinking and believing that God is good, but also doubting him in other ways. No matter where you are in your own faith journey, those six words, the ones I referred to before from Dallas Willard have the potential to challenge even the most faithful among us.

So what are those six words?

“Never believe anything bad about God.”

As I said before, I've always believed God is good, but I've also believed bad things about him. Essentially Dallas was saying, God is not only good, he's also not bad. I can't explain why that turn of phrase changed things for me, I can only tell you that it did.

When we consider the kinds of decisions we're faced with every day, some are decisions of privilege and preference like, "What's the best way to celebrate our anniversary?" Or, "Should we get another dog?" These are important decisions and can actually cause quite a bit of daily pressure if they linger unmade for too long. Just because something is fun and enjoyable doesn't mean the decisions surrounding it are always fun and enjoyable. Don't discount the weight of happy things.

Of course, you may also have more complex decisions though, like, "Which of these five highly qualified people should I hire?" Or, "How do I parent my teenage son or daughter?" "Is it time to retire?" "Should we look for a new church?" "Do we say yes to foster care?" "What's the best home for my aging parent?"

The questions we're carrying are endless, and there will not be a time in our lives where we have no more need for discernment, but one of the most foundational influences on our decision making that lingers beneath the surface is what we believe about God. Because, as I've shared with you from my own life, what we say we believe and what we actually believe don't always match up.

Something else Dallas Willard said a lot was that we always live what we believe, we just don't always live what we profess we believe. I professed, I believed God is good, yet I often made and, still sometimes make, decisions believing bad things about him.

What kinds of bad things? Well, there've been times in my life where I've pictured God as an angry teacher, disappointed that I can't get it right. I've pictured him as a distant relative, family yes, but not directly invested. So how does the way we picture God influence our decision making? I talk about this in chapter four of my book, *The Next Right Thing*, and I'll repeat it here.

If I believe God is distant, I'll feel alone and untethered in my decision making. If I believe God is a scolding parent, I may delegate decisions to someone else so I can avoid the consequence. If I believe God is wimpy, maybe I can manipulate him into doing whatever I want. If I believe God is indifferent, then he probably doesn't care what happens one way or another. If I believe God is like a carnival barker presenting three cups, I'll feel cheated or duped when he forces me to guess which one is hiding my right answer.

Is God like a puppeteer, a kind old grandfather, an abusive parent, an insecure friend, a greedy King, a manipulative mother, or a golden retriever? Has he chosen a number between one and 10 and is just waiting to see how close we'll get? Is he standing in the corner of the room with his arms crossed and his eyebrows raised? Does he roll his eyes, turn his back, or slam the door when I make a bad decision?

How we answer these questions will determine how we live our lives. And how we live our lives is really a series of decisions, so yes, how we see God is relevant to the decisions we make about schooling, parenting, money, vocation, marriage and friendship and everything else. We're always

telling ourselves a story. The question is, is the story true? As you consider your next right thing, what if you started with the decision to never believe anything bad about God?

He will not shame you, belittle or abuse you. He will not trick or tease you. He will not laugh at or make fun of you. He will not talk about you behind your back, stab you in the back or tell you to be more like your sister. He will not cheat on or betray you. His eyes are not narrowed at you. His ears are not closed to you. His nose is not turned up at you. His hands are not harsh with you, and you do not leave a bad taste in his mouth.

From a Psalm of David, chapter 23 in The Message translation, “God, my shepherd, I don’t need a thing. You have bedded me down in lush Meadows. You find me quiet pools to drink from. True to your word you let me catch my breath and send me in the right direction. Even when the way it goes through Death Valley, I’m not afraid when you walk at my side. Your trustee Shepherd’s crook makes me feel secure. You serve me a six course dinner right in front of my enemies. You revive my drooping head, my cup brims with blessing. Your beauty and love chase after me every day of my life. I’m back home in the house of God for the rest of my life.”

This is the word of the Lord. It’s absolutely true and given to us in love. Thanks be to God.

Thanks for listening to episode 111 of The Next Right Thing.

I hope this simple habit of never believing anything bad about God can be just one more rung on the trellis upon which your rhythm of life can continue to grow. Because it’s true that this is a podcast about making decisions, you know the bigger truth is that our daily decisions are actually making our lives.

As always, you can find me at emilypfreeman.com as well as on Instagram or Twitter @emilypfreeman. If you want a transcript of this episode, and you want to read it over and over again, well those and all other transcripts are available at thenextrightthingpodcast.com.

Well, instead of a quote this time, I’m going to leave you with a question to carry with you into your next right thing.

Here’s the question: When you close your eyes and imagine God, what is the first thing you see?

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