



242: Are you afraid of choosing wrong?

I'm Emily P. Freeman and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 242. This is a podcast about making decisions, but also about making a life. If you struggle with decision fatigue, chronic hesitation, or if you 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 for discerning your next right thing. One big reason for the chronic hesitation that some of us struggle with is a fear of making the wrong choice. This conversation would be better, had face to face. And of course, one episode won't eliminate the fear of choosing wrong, but it's a worthy conversation to at least begin here, especially considering how prevalent this fear is among many of us. Today, let's tackle what we're talking about when we say we're afraid of choosing wrong. Listen in.

One limitation we have in this conversation is obvious, but I'm going to say it out loud anyway. In fact, in five years, this is the thing I struggle with the most in hosting a podcast about decision making and discernment and that's the medium itself. Because here I am, in my office, alone with a microphone and there you are in your car or on your walk or in the alleyway on your lunch break or in your kitchen or on the train or in your yard or in your dorm room or on the balcony of your hotel. And we are unable to workshop, discuss or hold space for your actual decision. When I sit with someone in creative direction, we're able to discern together their next right thing in their business or in their creative work. And we can talk about the specific fears and challenges that might come along with that.

Or when I sit as a spiritual director, we're able to discern what God might be up to and where the spirit might be uniquely moving in someone's life situation. But my greatest challenge in these short episodes here is to provide something of value that's both broad enough to apply to the diversity of listeners here and specific enough to be helpful at the same time.

One way I've tried to work around the lack of specificity is by extending this conversation via email or on social media, trying there to ask good questions that might help to inform content as well as hear what decisions you're facing. Recently, I asked some questions like these, and one thing I discovered what I already mostly knew, but is that one of the primary roots of our decision fatigue is how afraid many of us are of making the wrong choice.

I wonder if you were to think back on a recent decision and reflect if there was part or maybe even a large part of you that held fear or at least some hesitancy over whether or not you were making the right choice. I've decided this is a worthy conversation to have here, even within the limitations of this particular medium. In order to at least name and define what we're talking about when we say we're afraid of choosing wrong. The question I'd love to explore in this space is what do we really mean when we say we're afraid of choosing wrong? While we may not be able to solve, answer, discern or decide your particular next right thing in one short episode, what I hope is that in the naming and the renaming,

perhaps you'll at least be able to get a bit of clarity and at most be able to release some of that fear so you can move forward.

Thousands responded when I asked on Instagram for you to share more about this fear of choosing wrong. Based on those responses and my own experience, here are some things we could mean when we say we're afraid of making the wrong choice. Maybe we mean there are so many choices to make, and we're overwhelmed by the number of options. We believe that there is only one right or very few right choices and every other option could be the wrong one, like a multiple choice test, where there is a singular right answer in a sea of infinitely possible choices. If you believe there's only one right choice that you have to figure out and the stakes feel super high, that adds to the fear of choosing, like in the context of parenting or healthcare, or even vocation. Maybe you're afraid of choosing wrong not because you believe there's just one right option, but that you think there is a best of the right options, like a hierarchy of choice.

If you think about it, that's still a singular choice hidden among a lot of possibilities. Another fear of choosing wrong could be because of anticipatory regret. Maybe you recognize there could be many good or right choices, but what if they are not necessarily good or right for you? What if you choose something now, but you want to change your mind later after learning more information, having a new experience or hearing a different option. Our fear of being stuck with an irreversible decision that we cannot change or take back can cause a lot of fatigue and hesitation. We're haunted by potential what ifs. When we say we fear choosing wrong, maybe we recognize that morality isn't really in question, like a right versus wrong in that kind of a way. But we recognize that something specific to our personality is at play and is informing this fear, like our own fear of missing out on something fun or something better. Or the concern that our choice will impact our status, reputation or standing in a community.

We want to make the best choice for us, for our family, for our students or our congregation or those in our care. The responsibility of the consequence of our choice impacting the lives of other people keep us afraid of making one that isn't the very best, the most comfortable or the most fun for everyone involved. There's also the fear of choosing wrong because we worry will fail, be rejected, or it will be revealed that we are wrong either theologically, intellectually, spiritually, relationally. We worry that what we step into might be worse than what we left behind. This fear of choosing wrong is a deeply troubling thing for a lot of us and it might reveal an admirable, if not also sometimes debilitating desire, to practice good discernment. We wonder, is this wisdom or is it fear? Am I being brave or just plain selfish? Is this a calling from the divine?

Or is it just my idea? Is my discomfort something important I need to pay attention to in order to maybe make a change? Or is this an indication of my own particular brand of laziness, immaturity or restlessness? Essentially, we wonder, is it me or is it them? Should I speak or stay quiet? And will the outcome be better or will it be worse? So if you have a decision before you and you're afraid you're going to choose wrong, it's really important, I think, to define our terms. First, wrong according to whom? You, your boss, a partner or best friend, your mother, a customer, or a client, a child, your extended family, your pastor, or your priest? Wrong according to God, wrong according to a version of God who you used to believe in, or a version of yourself, you used to be?

A version of yourself you wish you were? It's helpful to be specific when we say we fear we're choosing wrong. Wrong according to who? Secondly, I'd say binary thinking is rarely helpful in decision making. It's unfortunate that the word right is in the name of this podcast because the spirit of doing the next right thing is actually not one of trying to avoid the wrong thing. Instead, it's about staying in this moment today and taking just one next step in a particular direction not because you know everything or can see the future, but just because you're a human person doing your best along the way. Compassion and kindness go a long way when you're feeling afraid. Precious few choices are right, forever. There will be some things that you'll choose once and it will be right for life. But the older I get, the shorter that list

becomes. Another thing that can be helpful to remember is that one choice doesn't solve all problems. Sometimes we're afraid of choosing wrong because we've put the pressure on one decision to bring peace and clarity to a myriad of other decisions.

And while that may sometimes be true, I have found that the bigger truth is usually that decisions that are going to impact our lives in a grand way are rarely just one decision, but a series of smaller decisions. And it helps to think of them that way. And then there is the God question. One of the most common responses I've heard from readers and listeners who said they were afraid of making the wrong choice is a genuine concern. That what they want is not what God wants. If you're a person of faith who cares deeply about God's presence in your life, chances are you've wondered some version of that statement. Maybe you've read a verse like Matthew 5:48. That says, "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly father is perfect." And you might take that to mean that you're to not make mistakes in your choices. But in fact, this word translated as perfect doesn't suggest perfection in the way we might imagine. Scripture scholars agree this translation is not precise. The words be perfect, actually imply completion or a full. More precisely, it's an invitation to be whole.

What does it look like for you to make your decision from a place of wholeness rather than a place of fear? The last thing I'll share may not be popular. It's definitely not something I wanted to hear when my dad gave me this advice when I was in college. But what he said was, "49 to 51 is still a decision." Again, it may not be what we like hearing, but it is the truth. We would prefer our decisions be 100% to 0% every single time. But being a person is often about going with the 51% and then learning to name, grieve and let go of the 49. In this post 2020 world, decisions may feel different now than they did before. Maybe we lack some of the certainty that we once had, or the clarity of mind that used to come easy. Maybe our community has shifted and we don't have the support we once enjoyed in abundance. If you're afraid of choosing wrong, I hope these words have at least helped you get some clarity around what you are most specifically afraid of and what you mean when you say it.

I hope you'll take it from me, that you're most certainly not alone in your fear. And I also hope that the practice of doing just the next right thing today can bring some comfort. If you don't know what to do yet, perhaps it's not time to do it. And if you can't wait any longer, just do the best you can with what you know and who you are today. It's okay that there are things you don't know. It's okay that you can't see the future. It's okay to make a choice and see what happens. Here's to your next right thing.

Thanks for listening to episode 242 of The Next Right Thing. Well, I hope this simple practice of getting clarity on what we mean when we say we're afraid of choosing wrong, can be just one more rung on the trellis upon which your rhythm of life can continue to grow. Because while it's true, this is a podcast about making decisions. The bigger truth is our daily decisions are making our lives. My hope is that if you're experiencing a fear of making a wrong choice, that this episode could be one you can return to or share with someone you love or care about. As always, you can find me online at emilypfreeman.com or on Instagram @emilypfreeman. A special thanks to Leah Jarvis who creates our show notes and ensures that we have transcripts available for every episode and to the team at Unmutable for faithfully editing our sound. In closing, here's a word from Margaret Gunther who says in her book, Holy Listening. "When in doubt, I always assume that God is indeed at work." Thanks for listening and I'll see you next time.