



315: One Thing We Need for Making Tough Decisions

I'm Emily P. Freeman, and welcome to The Next Right Thing. You're listening to episode 315. I'm an author, a spiritual director, and an occasional workshop leader. I live in the Piedmont of North Carolina with my family and through my work I've helped thousands of spiritually thoughtful people overcome decision fatigue so that they can discern their next right thing in faith, in work and in life.

Today's episode is brought to you by my brand new book that releases three weeks from today. *How to Walk into a Room* will help you discern what to do next when you're carrying questions about spaces, relationships, or groups you're a part of, and to develop the art of knowing when it's good to stay, to fight for change, and to ask good questions, or if it might be time for you to gather your things, bless the experience, and say your goodbyes.

If you order the book anytime between now and the release day on March 12th, I have free gifts for you, including a brand new audio collection in the Quiet Collection app. It's called *Blessings for Hellos and Goodbyes*, and you'll also get a companion downloadable workbook to go along with it to help you know and name the hellos and goodbyes of your life. Learn all about it at emilypfreeman.com and start listening to those blessings today.

If you struggle with decision fatigue, with 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. When it comes to making tough decisions, there's one thing we all need that we cannot steal, force, rush or fake. Want to know what it is? Listen in.

In 2017, I was struggling to decide between two good things, to continue to do the good work I was doing as I was doing it or to go forward to graduate school to earn my master's degree. In 2020, John and I wrestled through the heartbreaking decision to leave our beloved church. In 2022, I sold my shares in a company I helped to start and build, knowing that not everyone would understand the decision.

When it comes to the various rooms of our lives, from the most personal to the practical,

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every decision we make, especially the ones where the stakes are high, requires something of us that we can't steal, force, rush, or fake. Perhaps you already know what I'm going to say. What these decisions require of us is discernment.

At the beginning of each of these episodes, I say that you're in the right place for discerning your next right thing. Well, I'm not sure in over 300 episodes, if you can believe it, if we've ever taken time here to talk about what discernment actually is or how we can begin to cultivate it.

Well, first, a quick myth to debunk about discernment, and it's that some people have it and some people don't. Now, what is true about that statement is that some people are more naturally inclined toward discernment. They're gifted to listen and pay attention in a particular way. They can pick upon nuance and maybe nonverbal cues and they just have a sense about things. But everyone has the capacity for discernment, and it's something I think we should all work to develop. In fact, that's what we've been doing here for over six years is I've been working to help all of us hone the skills required for wise discernment. So what do we mean by discernment?

Well, in religious circles, this is often a word used when talking about making decisions in the presence of God and determining where the spirit of God is moving. Discernment is both gift and practice. So it's gift because as I said, for some people discernment is a character trait they're naturally prone to. They have a sharp instinct or an intuition about things. They might have uncanny judgment.

Just like people who are gifted at anything, teaching or painting, a keen discernment might be a way that you naturally see and relate to the world. And probably if that's you, you probably know it. But it's still something you can cultivate and hone. It doesn't mean decisions are necessarily easier for you. In fact, sometimes they might seem more difficult because you have more data that you're dealing with, but it does mean that you're naturally attuned to input that others might not recognize or notice.

So that's how it's a gift. But it's also a practice in that every one of us can and will enter into discernment processes throughout our lives. Even if it doesn't come easy or naturally, we can practice being attentive by the art of reflection, through knowing and naming the reality of what is, both the discomfort and the gratitude. And there are a few things, and I think I would like to talk about discernment by talking through what we have to give up in order to develop discernment, which may feel like a negative way to talk about it. I do apologize, but this is what comes to my mind when I think about not just what is discernment but also what it isn't. And sometimes in talking about what it isn't, when we talk about what something isn't, we get a clearer picture of what it actually is.

And so a few things that we might have to give up if we want to develop discernment. The first is binary thinking. This is the type of thinking that implies there is always a fully right or a fully wrong choice or direction or decision. But the reality is in the process of discernment,

we learn that it may in the end be less about right or wrong and more about near or far. It isn't primarily about finding an answer, but about paying attention to arrows as we connect with God and one another. And over time, our ability to discern will grow, helping us to name not only the difference between lightness and darkness or goodness and corruption, but also all of the gradients in between. This is a way of knowing and moving into alignment with our truest self and who God is in and around us and what our role is in bringing God's peace into the world.

As it turns out, that's not a black and white process, and that can be deeply uncomfortable for us, but I think the sooner we recognize a name, that when we enter into a process of discernment, we are in many ways releasing our tight grip on binary thinking.

A second thing we might have to give up are our preferred timelines. The thing about discernment is it cannot be rushed. We can rush into decision-making if we need to, and oftentimes we do need to. We can make a fast call and like I said, it's often imperative that we do. But those fast calls are made better when they have a lifetime of discernment practices to undergird them. Those are the things we talk about here all the time, knowing and naming what you want, even if you can't get what you want, because your desire will always inform your decisions.

Developing a regular practice of reflection because our best teachers for future decisions are decisions we've already made, knowing your own core values and what matters to you, because if you don't know what matters most to you, then you're in danger of becoming successful inside someone else's life.

So what does all that have to do with preferred timelines? Well, whether your decision needs to be made quickly or if you have the space to hold and consider it, the clarity required for it can't be rushed. We know that from Marie Forleo. She talks about how clarity cannot be rushed. And so discernment teaches us to honor what we know, even when we can't control the timeline. And most of the time we can't.

A third thing we have to give up when we enter into this process is our beloved individuality. There are some decisions that are impossible to make alone. We need the collective wisdom, perspective, lived experience and discernment of the community. And if we want to look at this theologically for a moment, in all the years Jesus was on earth, he did not isolate himself and write a book alone for all of us to read and give us careful steps to live a careful life. Instead, as British theologian Lesslie Newbigin pointed out, Jesus did not write a book but formed a community. We are meant to live with and depend on one another, and there's no place where I have noticed this more than when I have needed discernment.

A fourth thing we have to release is certainty. Being a discerning person is not the same as being a certain person. Certainty demands that we know. Discernment confesses what we don't know. That's why we need discernment. The goal is not to finally make the exact right

call that is foolproof and binding. No, the goal of discernment is to be people of wisdom and nuance, people who realize we don't have all the answers, people who understand that while we have agency over how we show up, we cannot control the outcomes.

Which brings me to our last thing that you might have to give up, and that is positive results. This is the absolute worst one, and I know and I hate to have to say it, but the reality is that we will sometimes do the best with what we know at the time. We will lean hard on all the tools of discernment that we've collected, prayer, reflection, co-listeners, time, and still you'll make a call that ends up turning out not the way you want it or hoped.

And so we have to release this cultural idea that if we do all of the right things, pray all of the wise ways and practice our life with faithfulness and truth, that we will somehow on the other side come out with a positive outcome, one that we like and can celebrate. We want that to be true, but we've lived long enough to know that it isn't.

And so discernment invites us to shift our focus from the end to the middle. If we, along with the psalmist made the point not so much about getting out of the valley of the shadow of death, but about knowing that as we walk through it, God will be with us.

The one thing we all need for tough decisions, the one thing we can't delegate but have to learn to cultivate is discernment. But in the learning, the things we may have to let go include but are not limited to binary thinking, preferred timelines, individuality, certainty, and positive results. And so we have to ask ourselves, is it worth it? I say it is, and I hope you do too as we continue together to do our next right thing in love.

Thanks for listening to episode 315 of *The Next Right Thing*. While I hope this simple practice of developing discernment 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 that our daily decisions are making our lives.

While I've been saying this for months, it feels like 1 million months, but my next book, *How to Walk into a Room* is in its most basic form a book of discernment, where in addition to sharing a lot of my own story, I took many of the practices that we talk about here and narrowed them down to a simple four-part framework that you can use as you cultivate discernment in your own life.

When you order the book, you'll get access to some free gifts, including an entire audio collection inside the Quiet Collection app called Blessings for Hellos and Goodbyes, as well as a 30-page downloadable workbook with process pages to help you find low-key closure for the various beginnings and endings of your life.

To get all of that and learn more, just visit emilypfreeman.com. It's right there on the front page where to go and what to do. You'll claim your gifts there because you may have to wait

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for the book, but you don't have to wait for the blessings. Just know that once that release day comes, the workbook will no longer be free. So if you want that companion workbook, go ahead and order your copy of *How to Walk into a Room*.

As always, you can find me online at emilypfreeman.com or on Instagram @emilypfreeman where we have a transcript of this and every episode. Thanks to the team at Unmutable who faithfully edits our sound, and to Ashley Sherlock who creates our show notes and keeps this podcast organized.

Well, in closing, here are a few words from *How to Walk into a Room*. "Decision-making and discernment are connected, but it's possible to rush or bypass the discernment process in order to get to the relief of a final decision. When we do this, we miss out on the formation opportunities to know God, to know ourselves, and to depend on our community."

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