

Can you see into the future?

Do you always know what will happen in the future because of your present actions?

If you're like most of us you certainly can't see into the future and you probably don't always correctly discern the consequences from your actions. Yet, there are times in your life where you have to make a choice and you can pretty well guess what's going to happen in the future because of that choice.

Some of those choices may be risky and carry big consequences. Others may be routine or day-to-day choices and carry relatively little consequences. Still others may be best classified as choices of principle. Choices like, "I am not going to buy that toy for my child so she does not grow up thinking that she will always get her way." Another example might be that you don't want to talk to a co-worker because that person is always negative and constantly insults you without even realizing it. These are choices of principle that we make every day, throughout the day.

But what about the choices of principle that come from your core beliefs? How many times a day do you make those? How many times a day should you make those?

If we step back in time to when the founding fathers of this country signed the declaration of independence, they would have scarcely thought that they would eventually become the world's most powerful nation. However, because they stood for the principle of freedom, they knew the consequences of their actions would cost many colonial and British lives.

Further back in time we find that the early Christians stood for the principle of freedom. But this principle of freedom did not surround taxation without representation like the American Revolution. Instead their principle was a freedom to believe in Christ and act accordingly. Those who were persecuted and killed for their faith in Christ never could have imagined a world where over one billion people confess Jesus as Lord and Savior.

What was it about these Christians who were willing to die for principles? Were they any different than you or me?

From the scripture passage that was read earlier in Revelation we learn that God wants us to be hot or cold, not lukewarm. While the passage is not referring to body temperature, it is referring to how we act every day. Have you ever had lukewarm pasta or coffee? I am sure most of you would agree that it's not very good. However, hot pasta and coffee and cold pasta (as in pasta salad) and coffee (as in a mixed iced coffee) can both be very good. So the writer envisions this when he says he will spit out those that are lukewarm. Those people who are lukewarm are just not very tasty, metaphorically speaking of course.

What does a lukewarm person think and act like? Well it's someone who acts without principle. They neither offend nor are offended. They neither love nor hate. They are those that merely go through life without doing much of anything. They are usually what some might call "people pleasers." They are also people who tend to give a lot of excuses for everything they do or don't do. They are people who say they are going to do something and then either lie and don't do it or put it off and never get around to it. I know and have known several people like this in my life and I am sure you can think of people like that too. Even I have acted like these people at times. The trick to not being lukewarm, like anything else, is by not making a habit of it.

What lukewarm habits in your life do you need to break?

Yet, why does God not want us to be a lukewarm person anyway? Isn't it good not to offend or hate? The answer is, "sometimes."

It is good not to offend others—as long as you don't sacrifice one of your beliefs in the process. It is good not to hate—unless that hate is a hate of injustice or ungodliness. The point here is that we need to be a person of principle. A person of principle God understands and welcomes.

God understands and welcomes a person who believes in Jesus and acts accordingly. He understands and welcomes a person who does not kill others, who does not cheat on others, who does not retaliate against others, who does not judge others, and who gives according to his or her resources. These principles Jesus taught us in the Sermon on the Mount.

Most of all, God understands and welcomes a person who loves others, no matter their faults.

John 13:34-35 ³⁴ I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. ³⁵ By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

And Jesus also said:

Luke 7:47 ⁴⁷ Therefore, I tell you, her sins, which were many, have been forgiven; hence she has shown great love. But the one to whom little is forgiven, loves little."

And still elsewhere it is written:

1 John 4:12 ¹² No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

We know we are guilty of not loving our neighbor the way we should. And we are all guilty of failing in one or more of the principles Jesus spoke about in the Sermon on the Mount. For most of us, we have scarified our principles for the sake of others or for our own sake. So we might find it hard to understand how the

early Christians could die willingly for their principles. To understand that we look to Mark 8:34-38

Mark 8:34-38 ³⁴ ¶ He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. ³⁶ For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷ Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸ Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels."

We notice here that Jesus is not only saying that we must die for a principle—that is faith in him and the action of the gospel—but he also tells us why. We believe in Jesus and act out the gospel because we have nothing in life without them. And everything we gain in this life without them will be lost to us the day we die. So what do we really gain by denying Jesus or not acting in accordance with the gospel?

Some have tried to soften the radical approach of this message. Another writer succeeded by adding one little word—“daily.” Listen to the gospel of Luke’s version of Mark’s 8:34 verse:

Luke 9:23 ²³ ¶ Then he said to them all, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.

At the time Mark’s gospel was written around 70 A.D. many Christians were experiencing intense persecution. A decade or more latter Luke’s account still finds Christians experiencing some persecution, but not as much. What we learn then is that Luke’s version would no longer have people literally die for Jesus but rather figuratively die for Jesus. The writer is probably envisioning not a sacrifice of life but rather a sacrifice of selfish ways. While this belief is very important, it has also given people excuses to become complacent in their lives. I would not go so far as to say it has allowed Christians to become lukewarm but it has certainly allowed them to seek justification for being lukewarm.

How many things in this world are you willing to die for? Are you willing to die for your faith in Jesus? Are you willing to die for your action of the gospel? Are you willing to die for your principles?

We are lucky that in this country we do not have to make the decision of whether or not we are willing to die for our faith in Jesus. But should we act as if we did? Should we challenge ourselves to become less complacent in life and start standing up for our principles?

Most of us here would hopefully say that we believe in Jesus if asked by an atheist. Most of us would be able to stand up for ourselves and for Christ in that way if pressed into that type of situation. But how many of us here have volunteered that information?

I can remember countless times where I have felt a moment in a conversation that would have been a place to inject that I am a Christian or go to Church or something along those lines. But I was scared and did not say it. I was worried what the person would think of me or how it would change our relationship. So I stand before you guilty of the offense of denying Christ. By not admitting to

something about yourselves, especially something so fundamental to who you are like being a Christian, you are denying that thing.

For example, by not admitting you are married in a situation where adultery is possible, you are denying your marriage. By not giving your best effort at an activity, you are dying your capabilities. We all do these things every day—some to a greater or lesser degree. But how many of you typically do not tell your coworkers or your friends something you have always wanted to say to them? Maybe it is asking about their faith in God. Maybe it's telling them that their actions are harmful to others.

Whatever it is we owe it to ourselves and to God to be able to communicate effectively about our feelings, beliefs, and principles. Otherwise we not only deny ourselves, we also deny that person the opportunity to learn from you or more about you. Or we deny that activity or situation the opportunity to be changed because of you. If we do not start standing up for our principles, if we do not start taking more risks in our lives, we will fade into history not making our mark. Maybe that mark is meant to be little, but it's still a mark nonetheless. How many good things in your life have come about because you are willing to take the risk?

How many good things in your life have occurred because you stood up for a principle?

Maybe the principle you need to stand up for is being a better employee by going after the job you have always wanted. Maybe the principle you need to stand up for is being a better friend by telling a friend that their actions or words are harmful to your relationship. If you are too scared to do these things then you are in good company.

Using myself as an example, this church came about because I was no longer scared of what people thought of me. I was no longer scared to have people hate me. Today is a place in history for the state of Iowa as we became the first Church of Christ to ever have a woman serve a worship role. While this came from much sacrifice, in retrospect it was very little compared to what I thought it would be. I thought I would lose some friends over the issue of creating this gender-neutral church. And I have—and I don't care because they were never really my friends if they don't support me. I thought I would lose time and money also. And I have—and I don't care because I have wasted many hours of my life doing useless things and the money that was spent will do more good in this church than it will in my wallet. I thought there would always be the possibility that the church would

fail—and there is, and it only really matters a little. This is because when the church existed, it stood for something. It wasn't just another place to worship. There was, in essence nothing of real value that was lost by the risk of starting a new church. New and better friendships can be formed, more money can be made in the future, and more time will be spent doing something fruitful.

You see, life is all about perspective and the point is that God looks favorably upon those who stand for something and take risks as long as its done out of peace, patience, love, and humility. In addition, the action of creating this church was taken because I realized that while I am still only 25, I realized that I have done nothing of real value yet. Sure I went to Yale and I have volunteered many hours at churches and I have worked various jobs. But is that all there is to life—work, school, and the volunteering of resources? Of course not. We are more than just the culmination of our activities and achievements.

You may be asking yourself then: “What can I do to be a person of principle”?
“Where can I make my stand for what is right? “How can I be the person of principle God wants me to be”?

Well, first off, all of you who are here today are being a person of principle by supporting a church that believes women should have their own voice in the church and in the home. In doing so you are exercising the love that Jesus commanded us to show. But secondly, this church will give all those who want it, an opportunity to stand up for various principles through its various ministries. Whether it's serving the community's marginalized or maintaining a healthy lifestyle, we can all stand for principles through this church. And in the workplace maybe you can show the principles of Jesus—principles of loving your enemies and helping those who have less than you.

I think what this whole sermon boils down to, however, is not necessarily to find a whole lot of new principles to stand up for, but rather realizing you don't have forever to stand up for the ones you already know about. None of us are guaranteed tomorrow. And none of us can predict the future. So it has fallen to us to make the best decisions we can each and every day. So maybe those decisions are standing up for little principles or big ones. At the end of the day, standing up for something is better than doing nothing. How many times have you stood by and watched others do something you know you should have done, or said something you know you should have said? We need only to look to Jesus as our example of how to live our daily lives.

Jesus was man of principle. As a perfect human and the Son of God, Jesus stood for many things.

Before he scarified himself on the cross for our sins Jesus did a number of actions that made him a man of principle.

For example, he cleansed the temple from those that would profane it by making it a marketplace. While this story is in all four gospels, only in John does it come at the beginning of Jesus' ministry. In the other three gospels, it is towards the end. The significance of this is probably that it got everyone's attention. It was something that was probably viewed as audacious and outrageous, but it made the point that Jesus intended it to. The same could be said of this church, it could be viewed as audacious and outrageous by some, but it makes the point that women have roles and society is in need of our service.

What we also see in the John story is that people believed in Jesus because of what he did. It was his action of standing up for the principle of keeping the temple holy that allowed people to believe in Jesus. Think of how many people may have benefited from your actions of principle. Think of how many people could benefit from this church.

Also in the gospel of John, Jesus asked for a drink from a Samaritan woman, which was taboo at the time because she was a Samaritan and a woman. Most Jews considered Samaritans the lowest people on the social echelon. This is why it says

John 4:9 ⁹ The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?" (Jews do not share things in common with Samaritans.)

Secondly, women did not have many rights in the Jewish culture.

John 4:27 ²⁷ Just then his disciples came. They were astonished that he was speaking with a woman, but no one said, "What do you want?" or, "Why are you speaking with her?"

So Jesus broke social custom so that he may stand up for two principles: the first was speaking to a Samaritan and the second was speaking to a woman. I brought these two passages before this congregation because they are not extra ordinary things that Jesus did. They are examples of instances that defied customary social circumstances. We too can do similar things and break the bad habit of not being a

person of principle. Otherwise, we may find ourselves being more like the disciples who fled after Jesus was arrested. They denied Jesus because they were scared.

Are you scared to be a person of principle?

This is holy week on the Christian calendar. Today is Palm Sunday, the day that Jesus entered Jerusalem many years ago. He knew then what was about to happen. He knew that there were those who desired to kill him. But he did not go into Jerusalem to his certain death because he was standing up for a principle that was about him, he went into Jerusalem on the principle of saving us. As we look toward Easter next week, we must all try to remember the principle that should mean the most to all of us. That principle is not denying Jesus when he did not deny us. Because Jesus died for us, we should not fear the reproach of others. We should not ultimately care what they think of us, if we are standing up for what we know to be right and true. We must all try to make the effort to be the person of principle God wants us to be. Whether they are large or small principles, we all can make a big difference in this world just by being the person God created us to be and intended us to be. But we will fall short. That is why the last part of the passage in Revelation is so important.

Revelation 3:19-22 ¹⁹ I reprove and discipline those whom I love. Be earnest, therefore, and repent. ²⁰ Listen! I am standing at the door, knocking; if you hear my voice and open the door, I will come in to you and eat with you, and you with me. ²¹ To the one who conquers I will give a place with me on my throne, just as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne. ²² Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches."

God loves us even when we go through trials and errors in life. And those trials and errors in life only make us stronger. Paul says in

Romans 8:28 ²⁸ ¶ We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

For most of us, discerning God's purpose for us entails discerning what our principles already are. Those principles were instilled in us by God and were shaped by our surroundings.

If we are a person of principle, the text tells us that Jesus will come to us. And if we open our life to his will he will be with us. He will grant us temporal and eternal blessings beyond our present comprehension.

We do not know what the future will bring. But one thing is for sure. The spirit is speaking to this congregation and telling us that we need to be people of principles. We need to be Christians carrying out Christ's principles. And this church can do that through its various ministries. This church will do that.

Think about all the ways you can be a person of principle in your places of work and leisure this week. In the end though, think of how you can be a Christian of principle for this congregation and through this congregation. Whatever principles or principles you believe in, stand up for them and don't be scared. Life is too short to live with regret and God is not in need of a lukewarm Christian.