

NATIONAL COMMUNITY CHURCH

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The Power of Pre-decisions

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Happy New Year. Well, it's a joy to welcome you to National Community Church, all seven of our campuses and I've got some good news. We got an early Christmas gift right before Christmas; our building permit was signed, sealed, and delivered. And so that means that we are full steam ahead. If you're new you can actually read a little bit about that project towards the back of this next magazine, but I think it's one small step, one giant leap forward for us as a church.

This weekend we begin a series titled Detox. By definition, detoxification is a process whereby we rid our bodies and I might add our hearts and our minds and our spirits to the mix. We rid ourselves of toxic or unhealthy substances. I think the New Year is a great time to walk through that process and I want to challenge you over these next few weeks to make some changes. Now listen, you don't have to make a lot of changes, I might even recommend one or two and I don't think it even has to be a big change. I think there are little changes that can make a big difference.

If you have a Bible, you can turn to the book of Proverbs and we'll get there in just a few moments. If you ever have to go before a parole board, which I hope you don't, but if you do, the predisposition of the judge may have less bearing on your success than the scheduled time of that hearing. Now I want to say with all due respect to any judges that might be part of this church, my grandfather was a municipal judge in Fridley, Minnesota, so love judges, but a few years ago, National Academy of Sciences published a study involving 1,112 judicial rulings over a 10 month period. That study found that 65 percent of parole judges granted freedom to the first prisoner who appeared before the court, didn't matter what crime they had committed, and by the end of the morning session, the chance of parole dropped to near zero. Now, when those same judges returned from their lunch break, the first prisoner up for parole, once again had a 65 percent chance of being granted their freedom, and you might guess those odds steadily declined as the afternoon wore on. The question of course is why? Well, the authors of that study site something called decision fatigue. Decision making is a mental exercise and like physical exercise, we fatigue over time. It's harder to make good decisions after making lots of decisions, and part of it is that we lose a little willpower. Now, parents you know what I'm talking about. You want to limit how much time your kids spend on those digital devices, I know you do. I also know that by the end of the day you're begging them to take those digital devices and watch something just to stop the insanity. Why? Because decision fatigue sets in.

Let me give you an interesting example from the Gospels. Do you remember the circumstances surrounding the arrest of Jesus? The disciples of course scatter and then Peter actually denies Jesus three times. Those are bad decisions and I'm not letting the disciples off the hook but what happened right before those bad decisions? Jesus was praying in the garden of Gethsemane and if you study the timeline, you know, probably it would have started when the sun went down, guessing it might be a two hour meal and at one point he says, couldn't you keep watch for an

hour? And it says that he came back and he found the disciples what? Sleeping, not once, but twice. Now you're going to find this shocking, but the fact that they were sleeping tells me they were tired. I went to seminary, I studied these things. Okay. And so I think part of what contributed to poor decision making was good old fashioned fatigue. Judges aren't exempt, disciples aren't exempt and neither are you and me. One of the authors of this study, Jonathan Levy of Columbia University said; "I don't think this is it all unique to judges. I think you find the same thing with doctors and with admissions officers and with funding decisions." Decision fatigue is real and the ramifications are pretty profound for our everyday lives. According to one estimate, we make about 35,000 decisions every day. The question of course is how do we make good ones? That's what I want to talk about this weekend. I think detoxification begins with what I would call pre-decisions. It's the decisions you make before you have to make the decision.

This might seem a little frivolous, but Steve Jobs only wore one outfit, right, Blue Jeans, black turtle neck and new balance shoes. Why? Well, because it was one less decision he had to make because he wanted bandwidth for more important decisions. I wonder how many of us are already at decision fatigue by the time we get dressed in the morning, right, because we're trying to figure out what to wear. Now, let me say this upfront and if you're taking notes, you can jot this down; you are one decision away from a totally different life. Is that not good news? I think that is good news. And let me just play this out a couple of different ways. Joseph made a pre-decision. Now, after he was sold into slavery, he went to work for a man by the name of Potiphar and Potiphar's wife tried to seduce Joseph day in and day out. If Joseph had to make a decision every single time that Potiphar's wife flirted with him, my hunch is that there probably would have been some decision fatigue and the story might have gone the other way, but Joseph had made a pre-decision that he would not sleep with a woman who was not his wife. Period. Listen, if you wait to make a decision until you are in a tempting situation, good luck with that, right? It doesn't work so well. You've got to make a pre-decision. Now that pre-decision lands Joseph in prison, but he interprets a dream, he ends up being promoted by Pharaoh and, oh yeah, saves two nations from famine. How? Well it all started with a really good pre-decision.

Esther made a pre-decision; risked her life to plead for her people. She single handedly saved the Jewish people from genocide. How? A pre-decision; if I perish, I perish.

Ruth made a pre-decision. She said to her mother in-law, Naomi, wherever you go, I will go, wherever you stay, I will stay, your people will be my people and your God will be my God. If she had not made that pre-decision, she would not have met her kinsman, redeemer. Boaz. Boaz and Ruth get busy and they have a son named Obed, who has a son named Jesse who has a son named David. But I would argue that that kingly lineage traces back to a really good pre-decision.

And then there's Daniel. He makes a pre-decision not to defile himself with non kosher food. Now, let's be honest. I mean, this doesn't seem like the biggest issue, right? Why run the risk of offending the king of Babylon, but it's a bigger deal than you think. It's an integrity issue for Daniel and so it was that pre-decision that sets Daniel apart and eventually sets him up to become second in command to the king of Babylon. And then there's Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who make a pre-decision that they will not bow down to an idol and the list goes on.

What I'm getting at is this, destiny is not a mystery. Destiny is a decision, about 35,000 decisions every day, but I think it's these pre-decisions that determine our destiny and determine our legacy. And so I want to bring it down to earth and push the envelope a little bit this weekend.

Proverbs 22 verse 28. It says...

²⁸ "Do not move an ancient boundary stone set up by your ancestors."

Now, that may seem like a strange landing strip, but stick with me. A boundary stone is the way ancients established borders. They served as milestones, they identified where property lines would begin and end. And so let me paint a picture and then we're going to get painfully practical. In 1791, Congress passed the Residence Act authorizing President George Washington to establish the capital city. The first boundary stone was placed to Joan's point on April 15, 1791. It said, the beginning of the territory of Columbia thus began a two year process of placing 40 boundary stones all the way around what would become Washington, DC. Now a team of surveyors cleared 20 feet of land on each side of that boundary line. They placed stones at one mile intervals and the side of the stone that faced the capital city said jurisdiction in the United States and the side that faced the other direction said either Virginia or Maryland. Now four of those original stones have gone missing, 36 of them still exist and they're the oldest federal monuments. They determine what is and what is not Washington DC. In much the same way as those surveyors cut a 40 foot path placed boundary stones we've got to establish boundaries in our lives; it's the way that we make pre-decisions.

I'll give you a simple example. If you're in an abusive relationship, you've got to reestablish some boundaries. Now, if it's a marriage, the goal is reconciliation, but you might need some separation for a season to reestablish some physical and emotional boundaries that are healthy and holy. If you don't, it's called codependence. Codependency is letting someone trespass on you emotionally or physically. Now, I realized when I say something like that, I don't know the context you're in, might recommend you talk to a campus pastor or a counselor if you're in one of those situations. But here's what I know for sure, you've got to survey, the problem, then you've got to clear a path and then somehow you've got to reestablish a boundary in your life.

Let me zoom out a little bit. When God gave the Israelites the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai, what was he doing? I would suggest that he was paid placing boundary stones around human behavior. Do not have any gods before me, honor your father and mother, keep the Sabbath holy, do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not covet. On one side of those original stone tablets you can imagine it saying jurisdiction of God's kingdom. Right? And on the other side, I guess it would say sin. Those Ten Commandments surveyed the boundary between what is right and what is wrong. And I think it's interesting that even those who don't prescribe to Judaism or Christianity, pretty universally accepted that these are important boundary stones.

Now, let me make a footnote. I think relativism is moving those boundary stones further and further apart until eventually you can't even see what's right or wrong anymore. I think legalism is the exact opposite. It's moving those boundary stones closer than they were meant by the original intent. I'll give you an example. The Pharisees had 39 rules and regulations as it related to the Sabbath. And this is like pretty crazy stuff. Like it would almost be, it would actually be a

fun movie to see how they kind of put this into practice. But you can only walk 2000 cubits, you could not tie or untie a knot and you could not strike the final blow of a hammer. Things that make you go, hmm. Right? I think what was happening was they were bringing the boundaries in and then what does Jesus say? He says, come on, man, wasn't made for the Sabbath, you're turning these rules and regulations into this form of legalism. He said, the Sabbath was made for man. And so if we implement too many rules and regulations, we go beyond the original intent and we're putting up trespassing signs where God didn't. And of course the opposite is true as well. Now, let me add a little caveat. Jesus actually move some of these boundary stones in the Sermon on the Mount and just for the sake of time I'll give you one example. He said, you have heard that it was said an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. This was kind of a baseline way of executing justice in the Old Testament. And then Jesus says, but I tell you, if someone slaps you on the cheek, turn to him the other cheek, also. What's happening there? What is Jesus doing? I think he's doing what Benjamin Banneker and Andrew Ellicott were doing. He was surveying the Kingdom of God. He was cutting a 40 foot path around what righteousness looks like and he was putting boundary stones in place. He was saying, this is us. Okay, this is who we are and who we aren't. This is what we do and what we don't. We're the people that love our enemies. We're the people that pray for those who persecute us. We're the people that turn the other cheek. We're the people that go the extra mile. We're the people I hope that do unto others as we would have them do unto us. Are you picking up what I'm throwing down?

Okay. Let me make it personal and practical. What boundary stone perhaps do you need to put back in place? Even as I'm talking something pricks your conscience or maybe it's just something that it's a difference between permissible and beneficial. What boundaries are... or is there a pre-decision that you need to make that you know it would pay some dividends in this coming year?

I want to take us through a little exercise and I find it helpful to think in categories. Otherwise this is overwhelming, right? Like where do I start? And so let me give you four categories. Physical, financial, spiritual, and we'll call it chronological as it relates to time and you can jot those down and maybe jot down a few ideas. And what I want to do is just share some of the boundary stones the Lora and I have put in place or that I've put in place in my life. And so why don't we start with physical? We'll keep it pretty simple. I think it comes down to diet and exercise, which then adds a huge impact upon our sleep, which is equally as important. Now, why would a pastor talk about this? I'll tell you why, because the Bible says that the body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, and so how we take care of the body is a stewardship issue. And in my experience, you got to make some pre-decisions along the way. Now it seems to me like diet is a pre-decision as it relates to food. Ahh, this is scary putting this out there but sometimes I do it just to hold myself accountable. I have a sugar problem. I think the evidence of it was just the other day went to see a movie and there is like a 99 percent chance I'm going to come out with a blue tongue. Do you know why? Because a movie is not a movie without an ICEE. I like tic tacs, you know what and good for your breath. That's great, also 97.5 percent sugar, sugar pills. Process sugar ate my lunch last year. Or maybe it's the opposite and I didn't just pay the price in pounds, I'm in a writing season, that means there are days that I'll write for 13 hours, that's not easy. You know what I've discovered when I consume too much sugar, I can't concentrate. And that's the tip of the iceberg. It has ramifications on lots of different systems in the human body and so, you know what I'm gonna do this year, I'm still working out the details, so stick with me, but that probably means soda needs to go goodbye as well as candy and it probably means I need

to get a flat white instead of caramel macchiato. And so, is there a change that you need to make in your diet that would help you listen, follow Christ more effectively?

Now along with diet, I think exercise is critical and for what it's worth, I think when I'm reestablishing an exercise routine, I need two things. I need a plan and I need a goal, again, pretty simple. I need a plan. When I ran the Chicago marathon two years ago, that first run, the first 72 training runs the three miles, you wouldn't even believe how long it took and how much pain I was in after it. I remember thinking to myself, there is no way that I'm going to get there, like, how is this going to happen? But you know what? I followed that plan without that plan, a plan is a pre-decision. Without that plan, I am not achieving that goal. Is there a plan that you need to put in place and listen if you have more difficulty disciplining yourself than others, you might want to think about a trainer. I think the other key for me is setting goals. So last year decided to take it easy on my two reconstructed knees and do a bike century. Now again, just keeping it real thought it would be 100 miles, didn't train quite as much as I could have or should have. It turned into a metric century wasn't that convenient, but up until that point, I don't think I'd ever biked more than 12 miles in my life. And so what is that, 62 - 63 miles? Listen, did you ride a bike century? Are you giving me a hard time? You've got to set a stretch goal and so plan and goal.

Alright, let me talk finances. Are you still good? Again, don't get overwhelmed, we're talking about one or two things in probably just one of these categories. Let me talk finances. If diet is the way that we put boundary stones around food, then I think budget is the way that we put boundary stones around money. If you don't have a budget, money is going to disappear. You're going to end up spending it on things that you wish you hadn't. Why? Because you don't have any boundaries in place. Now, for the sake of time, I'll just say this, one of the best pre-decisions that Lora and I ever made when we got married is that we would never not tithe. In others, we made a decision no matter how much or how little we had, no matter what our savings or debt was like, we were going to give God the first 10 percent of our income as a starting point. And ultimately our goal is to live off a 10 percent, give 90 percent, and by the way, I think the way you do that, is you keep moving a boundary stone, you keep upping the percentage that you give back to God. But it's that pre-decision that really, I think, has made such a difference and brought us so much joy in our lives. Now, it seems like shrinking your budget by 10 percent like that would shrink your boundaries, your financial boundaries by 10 percent, doesn't it? But I've found that God can do more with 90 percent than I can do with 100 percent. And I love what Proverbs 11:24 says, *"the world of the generous gets larger and larger. The world of the stingy gets smaller and smaller."* Is there a pre-decisions you need to make this year? Might be giving that tithe or giving above and beyond the tithe. Listen, it might be eliminating debt. It could be saving a down payment for a home. The only way those things are gonna happen is if you make some pre-decisions.

Let me talk spiritual boundary stones, key to spiritual growth, spiritual disciplines. This is not rocket surgery. This is my new favorite, I just like it, I saw shirt, rockets are right. You get it right? It'll catch up with you if you don't, you will love it as much as I do. Are there some spiritual disciplines that you need to put in place and this could range from fasting to meditation? I consider a gratitude journal, a spiritual discipline, but I think for the sake of time, let me just touch on this. If you don't have a Bible reading plan when you get up in the morning, where do you turn? In my experience, if I don't have a plan, I may last a few days kind of flipping here and

there, but man, I need the accountability and so YouVersion, little app that I use and I try to change translations because it makes my synapses fire in a different way. And so this year I'm doing something I've never done; The Message, which is more of a paraphrase than a translation, but I am doing New Testament, Proverbs and Psalms. Now, that doesn't mean I won't spend any time in the Old Testament, I will. But I felt like this year I wanted to do something different, instead of reading for the breadth of going cover to cover, I maybe wanted to read a little bit more for depth and spend a little bit more time because the Bible wasn't meant to be read, it was meant to be meditated. And so, is it that that's a pre-decision that you might want to make this coming year?

Alright, diet, boundary stones around food; budget, boundary, stones around money. I think calendar is the way we've put boundary stones around time. And if you don't control your calendar, your calendar is going to control you. And so let me just share one decision I made a number of years ago and my only hope is that maybe by sharing some of these pre-decisions that have changed our trajectory, that maybe, just maybe you'll come up with an even better idea of what it is that God wants to do in you this coming year. And so a number of years ago I wrote a book. When you write a book, people think you know more than you do and so they invite you to come and speak places. And Lora and I had this running joke that every opportunity was an amazing opportunity until it didn't become a joke because I was gone way too much. And so it's probably seven or eight years ago, we said, listen, you got to put a boundary in place because this is getting ridiculous. And so I said, I won't do more than 12 overnight speaking trips. Now this year I felt like with a building project commencing that I would be involved with it that maybe I needed to move that boundary stone and so only seven speaking trips last year. You know what? I am so grateful. Now, was it easy to say no to some of those opportunities? No, but I will tell you that I think it was Andy Stanley who said 'saying yes to one thing is saying no to something else'. And you and I both know that when you start saying yes to this and that and the other thing, what are you saying no to? A lot of times it's something that's far more important than the thing that you're saying yes to. And so is it possible that you need to put some boundaries in place in your calendar? Now that's scary for me to say and I'll tell you why, because before you quit leading a small group, before you quit serving in a ministry, could I suggest that one way we seek first the Kingdom of God is by serving others and may I even be bold enough to say perhaps it's some other boundary stones that you need to move so that you have margin to mentor at the DC Dream Center, so that you have time to go on that mission trip this year, so that you have time to volunteer and experience the joy of a production or worship or hospitality or kid's ministry. Alright, a lot to digest hope you aren't overwhelmed.

Let me close with this. One of our annual routines, Lora and I, we do a little two day retreat, marriage retreat and we'll talk about budget and calendar, but we also come up with a word for the year. And kind of crazy this year, first time ever we came up with the same word and I'm not going to tell you what it is. No, I will because that would be mean wouldn't it. You know, what minimalism, for whatever reason, we just felt like we had accumulated a few too many things that those boundaries stones. Listen, when you have clothes in your closet that you haven't worn in a year, I wonder if maybe someone else could use those more than you could. And I think we just felt like let's simplify our lives a little bit, but that's not my point. In 2012, I wrote this book called The Circle Maker and God blessed it, but something else happened too, I had a handful of critics who came after me pretty hard. Now that's par for the course. If you write a book that sells

more than a few copies you probably ought to expect a few, one star and two star reviews. And the positive feedback a thousand to one but I wasn't anticipating being branded as a heretic and I think some people would have burned me at the stake. Now, I wish I could say that it's easy for me just to fly above that but I'm like everybody else, you tend to read the negative review and that gets in your spirit and it kinda messes you up. But here's what happened. Going into 2012, I had no idea why I chose this verse, crazy. Proverbs 19:11 was my verse of the year. *"It is to the glory of the man to overlook an offense"*. My goal that year, going into the year before any of this happened was to be unoffendable. And I look back on it now and I realize I probably could have let some bitterness get in my spirit and I probably could have gotten pretty defensive, but you know what, instead of that, I made a pre-decision, I put a boundary stone in place, happened to be Proverbs 19:11 and that boundary stone made all the difference in my life that year.

Now, I don't know where you're at this weekend, but I have a hunch there's a boundary stone you need to put in place, might be physical, might be financial, might be spiritual, might be chronological. Again, don't try to make 12 changes, okay? But is there one or two things as you press in and say, God, what boundaries do I need to put in place this year that would honor you, that would usher your kingdom into my life in a new way, that would take me to the next place spiritually? I pray that God would guide and direct you and reveal that to you and I might encourage you to make that decision this weekend.

One last thought, I think the most important decision you can make there is a God who loves you so much that he sent his son. And by the way he made a pre-decision for the joy that was set before him, he endured the cross. God loves you that much. I think we've got to do something with that and I think the most important decision we can make is that decision to put our full faith in the God who was willing to die for us and the God who has these plans and purposes for us. And I've got to say this; I don't think you're going to be able to move that boundary stone or make that pre-decision without the help of the Holy Spirit. So I pray that maybe this weekend you would make that decision.

Let's pray. Father, thank you, it's a joy to begin this new year with our spiritual family, God looking at your word that gives us hope and faith that encourages us. God, I pray that this weekend that you would speak to us. I pray that no one would feel or sense that they are under any kind of condemnation; there is no condemnation to those who are in Christ. But I also pray that where the Holy Spirit is convicting, that we would be responsive to it because we know that God you always have what's best for us at heart. And so we put our full faith and trust in you. We ask for your help as we embark on this New Year. God help us to put these boundary stones in place for your glory, for our good. In Jesus name. Amen.