

THE
BEST
QUESTION
EVER

A REVOLUTIONARY APPROACH TO DECISION MAKING



ANDY STANLEY

THE
BEST
QUESTION
EVER

?

ANDY STANLEY

Multnomah Publishers® *Sisters, Oregon*

THE BEST QUESTION EVER

published by Multnomah Books

A division of Random House, Inc.

© 2004 by Andy Stanley

International Standard Book Number: 978-1-59052-390-6

Interior design and typeset by Katherine Lloyd, The DESK

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from:

New American Standard Bible® © 1960, 1977, 1995

by the Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

Other Scripture quotations are from:

The Holy Bible, *English Standard Version* (ESV) © 2001

by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers.

Used by permission. All rights reserved.

The Holy Bible, New International Version (NIV)

© 1973, 1984 by International Bible Society,

used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House

Multnomah and its mountain colophon are registered trademarks

of Random House Inc.

Printed in the United States of America

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise—without prior written permission.

For information:

MULTNOMAH BOOKS

12265 ORACLE BOULEVARD, SUITE 200

COLORADO SPRINGS, CO 80921

08 09 10—10 9 8 7 6

*This book is dedicated to
Lanny Donoho.*

*Solomon was right—there is a friend
who sticks closer than a brother. You have been
that kind of friend to me. Thank you.*

Contents

Introduction 11

PART I: THE QUESTION

1. Dumb and Dumber 17

2. A Most Uncomfortable Question 21

3. The Slippery Slope 25

4. Climate Control 33

5. Stemming the Tide 40

6. Seasonal Wisdom 47

7. Looking Ahead 52

PART II: A QUESTION OF TIME

8. Time Bandits 65

9. Live and Learn 76

PART III: A QUESTION OF MONEY

10. Money Wise 87

11. Unconventional Wisdom 97

PART IV: A QUESTION OF MORALITY

12. Sex for Dummies	107
13. Hindsight	113
14. Life Rules	120
15. Extreme Measures	126
16. Flee!	134

PART V: WISDOM FOR THE ASKING

17. Hide and Seek	143
18. Knowing What You Don't Know	148
19. Everybody's Business	154
20. Listening, Learning	158

PART VI: THE BEST DECISION EVER

21. Perfecting Your Follow-Through	169
22. The Beginning of Wisdom	177
<i>Epilogue</i>	187

Introduction

IF ONLY...

The Best Question Ever? Who do I think I am? We've never even met and I have written an entire book based on the premise that I know *the* question that trumps every other question you could ask about your life. And doesn't the word *Ever* hint of naïveté on my part? *Ever?* As in the history of mankind?

Perhaps I should have gone with *The Best Question I Know*. Or maybe, *A Really Good Question*. But the truth is, I believe the question I'm about to pose really *is* the Best Question Ever. For everybody.

This may not be the most *important* question ever; there are probably more important questions. But as you are about to discover, the Best Question Ever will help bring clarity to the important questions. A more important question for you might be, "Should I take this job?" Or, "Is she the one for me?" Or, "Does God want me to move?" "Lease or buy?" "Should I stay or leave?" The Best Question Ever will bring you fresh insight to all of these questions.

So what makes this question *the* best question? Three things. First, it can be applied to every decision you ever make

for the rest of your life. Second, it is a question that is easy to answer; in most cases you will know the answer immediately. Third, it is a question that pierces the fog of self-deception.

Bottom line, what makes the Best Question Ever the best question ever is that it is the most *helpful* question ever.

LOOKING BACK

If the title of this book seems a bit over the top, my next statement may send you scrambling back to your local bookstore in search of a refund. In fact, I have been staring at my computer screen for the past fifteen minutes, wondering just how foolish it would be for me to make the claim I am about to make this early in the book. But having just read through the entire manuscript, I'm more convinced than ever.

So here goes.

Your greatest regret could have been avoided had you asked the Best Question Ever and then acted on your conclusion.

A bit strong?

Regardless of whether it is an action or event you regret or an entire chapter of your life that you wish you could do over, had you evaluated your options through the lens of this single powerful question, you would have avoided what may be your greatest ongoing source of pain. As you move through the pages that follow, you may find that this one question could have changed the trajectory of your entire life.

The Best Question Ever is a question I ask more than once every day. It is a question that guided me through my

late twenties as a single man. It is a question that has served me well through sixteen incredible years of marriage. It is a question I have taught my three kids to ask about every option that comes their way. They know it is the lens through which we evaluate every decision we make as a family.

Over the past twenty years I have had the opportunity to teach this principle to thousands of middle-school and high school students. Many of them are adults now with children of their own. Letters, e-mails, and conversations assure me that the Best Question Ever continues to serve as a decision-making filter for scores of these young adults.

When I share the Best Question Ever with adult audiences, the response is nearly always the same: “I wish I had heard this years ago.” Translated: “I could have avoided some regret if only...”

The Best Question Ever serves as a lens through which you can evaluate your options. It is a filter that casts things in their actual light. It is a grid that provides context for every decision. The Best Question Ever will provide you with a new perspective on your love life, your career, your finances, your family, your schedule—everything. The Best Question Ever will shed light on issues the Bible doesn’t specifically address.

But the Best Question Ever is not always an easy question to ask. It can be a bit threatening. It exposes so much about our hearts and our motives that it is, well, it’s just not an easy question to ask. That’s just one more reason why it is the Best Question Ever.

LOOKING AHEAD

This book is divided into six sections. In section 1 you will be introduced to the Question. It takes me a couple of chapters to get to it, so be patient. In the three sections that follow, we will apply the Best Question Ever to three key areas of life: your time, your money, and your relationships. In section 5 I'm going to let you in on a secret known by all the world's best decision-makers. In the final section I'm going to challenge you to make a decision that will allow you to get the maximum benefit from the Best Question Ever.

The principle behind *The Best Question Ever* has impacted my decisions, and consequently my life, more than any other. This is more than another book for me. This is a life message. The content is not simply pulled from a series of sermons; it is drawn from the past twenty-two years of my life's journey.

All right, it is time to get started. I hope you enjoy the book. More importantly, I hope this powerful question becomes a permanent part of your decision-making process. If you have the courage to ask it, your Heavenly Father will use this simple question to guide and protect you in the days to come. And as you experience the difference this question makes, I think you will agree that it really is the Best Question Ever.

—Andy Stanley

Part I

THE QUESTION



1

DUMB AND DUMBER

Finding Common Ground

You and I have something in common. We've both done some really dumb stuff. Stuff we hope nobody ever finds out about. Stuff we wish we could forget. There's money we wish we hadn't spent, cars we wish we had never bought, investments we wish we hadn't made, invitations we wish we hadn't accepted, relationships we wish we had stayed out of, jobs we wish we had never taken, partnerships we never should have entered into, phone calls we never should have returned, contracts we never should have signed.

If you are like me, you look back and wonder, *How could I have been so dumb? So blind? So foolish?* We should have known better. In some cases, we did know better, but for some reason we thought we could beat the odds—that we would be the exceptions to the rule. In spite of what common sense (and maybe a friend or two) told us, we believed that we could control the outcome of our decisions.

So we followed our hearts, we trusted our emotions, we did our own thing, and now we wonder what in the world we were thinking.

If you're like most people, some of the decisions you wish you could unmake led to chapters of your life you wish you could go back and unlive. Picking a stock based on a bad tip is one thing; choosing a marriage partner without doing some due diligence is something else entirely. Making four \$24.95 payments on something that's only worth \$24.95 to begin with is embarrassing; \$25,000 in credit card debt can ruin you.

Some of our bad decisions simply embarrass us. Others scar us.

What's obvious now wasn't so obvious then. And what's obvious to us now may not be so obvious to everybody around us. Chances are, you've already bumped into somebody on the verge of making the same dumb decision you made when you were his age. And, as I was, you were sure that once he heard your sad story, he would drop to his knees in gratitude for your life-changing insight. Having come to grips with the error of his ways, he would immediately reverse course, call off the marriage, pay cash, tear up the contract, dissolve the partnership, sell his drums, stay in school, or whatever.

But no. Instead, he endures our tales of woe, thanks us for the unsolicited advice, and continues full speed ahead into the oncoming train. And we think back and wonder,

Could I have possibly been that naive? That stubborn? That foolish?

Yep.

POOR PLANNING

When we watch people we know—or strangers for that matter—make foolish decisions, it's as if they are strategically and intentionally setting out to mess up their lives.

After all, it takes a lot of planning to marry the wrong person. Any marriage, even a bad one, is not a casual endeavor. Think of the time and energy it takes to set up a doomed business partnership or to start a business that has no hope of success. Think about all the paperwork people have to wade through to purchase houses they can't really afford or lease cars they are going to lose or apply for loans they can't repay.

Having watched dozens of people methodically waste their lives, potential, and money, I've concluded that while nobody *plans* to mess up his life, the problem is that few of us *plan not to*. That is, we don't put the necessary safeguards in place to ensure a happy ending.

Nobody plans to destroy his marriage, but few people take precautions that guarantee "as long as we both shall live."

Nobody plans to raise irresponsible, codependent children, but it's clear from looking at society that a bunch of parents don't plan not to.

Nobody plans an addiction, but it happens. Why? A lack of necessary precaution.

I haven't talked to anyone who planned to be buried under a mountain of credit-card debt, but I've met a lot of people who didn't plan not to be.

Our poor planning leads precisely where we had no intention of going. And once there we ask, "How did this happen to me?"

The Best Question Ever will provide the answer.

Better yet, the Best Question Ever will help you stay out of the situations and circumstances that rob you of your potential, your opportunities, and your future.

2

A MOST UNCOMFORTABLE QUESTION

And the Courage to Ask It

At the age of twenty-five I came across three verses in Scripture that totally changed the way I made decisions. I suddenly had a new filter through which to evaluate every opportunity, invitation, and relationship—everything I was asked to do, everything I was tempted to become a part of. I began to consider my whole life through this new grid, a grid that boiled down to asking one simple question.

The reason I consider it the best question ever is that it has the potential to *foolproof* every aspect of your life. It will give you a new perspective on your love life, your career, your finances, your family, your schedule, everything. The

Best Question Ever sheds light on issues the Bible doesn't specifically address. The Best Question Ever provides you with a context for addressing questions of where to draw the line morally, relationally, and ethically. Like a piercing light, this powerful question cuts through the fog surrounding so many of your decisions and enables you to see clearly.

And yet, as you are about to discover, it's not an easy question to ask. It's not that the words are difficult to say. It's just that the question exposes so much about your heart and your motives that it is, well, it's just not an easy question to ask. It's like walking out of a dark building on a sunny day—there is something about this question that will make you want to retreat to the shadows where your eyes have already adjusted. Like direct sunlight to the unshielded eye, this question can be extremely uncomfortable.

Here's why.

THE ART OF SELF-DECEPTION

You see, in addition to making the occasional dumb decision, you and I have something else in common: We are good at deceiving ourselves. Really good.

Self-deception comes naturally to me. I can make a bad decision look and sound like a great decision with one hand tied behind my back. I can make a poor financial choice sound like an investment opportunity. I've made poor relationship decisions sound like ministry opportunities. I've

missed countless workouts under the guise of “I need my rest.” I’ve rationalized gallons of ice cream with the phrase “Everybody needs to live a little,” as if ice cream adds to the quality of life. I’ve wasted massive amounts of time doing all kinds of things that seemed important at the time but had no cumulative value. And given enough time, I can even find a Bible verse or two to support my foolishness.

Every kind of addiction begins with similar self-deception.

“This won’t hurt anybody.”

“I’ll only do it once.”

“I haven’t had any for a week.”

“I’ll be careful.”

“I can handle it.”

“I can quit whenever I want to.”

Sound familiar? Chances are, you don’t have to think past last week to come up with a bad decision or two that you talked yourself into. Probably some of your greatest regrets started with choices that you convinced yourself were good ones. But in fact you were actually robbing yourself. Your bad choices ended up costing you relationally, financially, and maybe even spiritually.

And the strange thing is, most of the time we are fully aware of the game we’re playing. The fact that we have to give ourselves a reason or excuse at all ought to tip us off. Think about it. You don’t have to go through a series of mental gymnastics to convince yourself that it’s a good idea to eat a serving or two of vegetables every day. You never

have to rationalize why you ought to exercise, save money, or avoid bad company. You just know. You don't sit around looking for reasons to do the right thing; it's the bad decisions that require creative reasoning.

READING THE GAUGES

It is this human habit of self-deception that makes the Best Question Ever so uncomfortable to ask. This question exposes the irrationality of our excuses. It reveals our true intent. It penetrates the walls of rationalization behind which we are prone to hide. It dismantles the arguments we use to keep the truth at arm's length.

All of which is fine if you really want to do what is right. But this little question can become a nuisance on those occasions when, instead of trying to make a right decision, you are trying to make a decision right. On those occasions the Best Question Ever has the potential to irritate as well as illuminate. Because of that, it is very important for you to pay close attention to your emotional response to the Best Question Ever. Your reaction to this dynamic little question will tell you a great deal about yourself. And this is one lesson you cannot afford to miss.

3

THE SLIPPERY SLOPE

Why Everybody Goes There

Let me take you now to those verses that altered forever the way I make decisions. We find them in the apostle Paul's first-century letter to Christians residing in the city of Ephesus. You know it as the book of Ephesians.

The letter opens with an inspiring reminder of the believer's new identity that resulted from being adopted into the family of God. For three chapters the author expounds on all the benefits of being "in Christ." Beginning in chapter four, however, Paul turns a corner.

He begins the second half of the book with this plea: "[I] urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called" (Ephesians 4:1, ESV). In other words, live your life in a way that reflects the changes God has made in you. Or as a friend of mine is fond of saying, "Don't live the way you used to live. After all, you are not the person you used to be."

From there Paul launches into one of the most practical sections in the Bible. He talks about everything from sex to marriage to alcohol to...you name it. He gives instructions on what is permissible to talk about, think about, and even laugh about. The entire discussion is intense and thorough and, frankly, somewhat overwhelming.

GIMME TRACTION

Paul goes so far as to suggest that we become imitators of God! My gut response? *Yeah, right. Not in this lifetime.*

It's not that Paul's list of lofty standards isn't worth striving toward. It's just that I know me. I'm not that good, that consistent, that disciplined. Besides, just about everything in Paul's list runs directly against the cultural current. So let's face it, I'm not going to get any support out in the real world.

Read Ephesians 4 and 5 for yourself. It's an incredible catalog of virtues and values, the kind of stuff parents preach to their children all the time. But is it realistic? Can anybody really pull it off? At first glance, I think not.

The good news is that Paul anticipates the frustration of his readers. So he incorporates into this intimidating list of what-to-do an invaluable *how-to-do-it*. Specifically, he unveils an approach to life that, if embraced, will set us up for success as we attempt to live out the values he listed. And it is from this short but powerful piece of instruction that we derive the Best Question Ever.

Here's what Paul writes:

Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil. So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. (Ephesians 5:15–17)

Life changing, huh?

No? Okay, let's break it down.

Paul starts off with a big transition word, a word loaded with implications:

Therefore...

As a mentor of mine was fond of saying, whenever you see a *therefore*, you gotta ask, "What's it *there for*?" On this particular occasion, "therefore" connects all the stuff Paul is telling us we *need* to do with his explanation of *how* to do it. It's as if he is saying, "If the values and practices I've outlined, as overwhelming as they may seem, are things you desire to embrace, if something in you stirred when you imagined living out those standards, if you want to live life on an entirely different plane, then here's what you need to do."

Then Paul reveals the principle that gives all of us wannabe Christ followers the traction we need to live out what, at times, seems out of reach:

... be careful how you walk...

Or to turn it around, *Don't be careless how you walk*. In other words, following Christ is not a casual endeavor. It requires extreme caution. If we are serious about living out the values the New Testament teaches, we must watch our step. After all, we know from experience how easy it is to stumble.

Then without so much as a pause, Paul discloses the criterion by which we are to measure and judge every one of our choices. In the six words that follow, we are given the grid through which we are to evaluate every invitation and opportunity. Here is the standard, the yardstick by which we are to assess our financial, relational, and professional decisions. Get out your highlighter.

... not as unwise men but as wise...

The Best Question Ever, the question that sets us up for success where it counts, the question that enables us to consistently apply the commands of the New Testament is this:

What is the wise thing to do?

Wait a minute. How could *that* possibly be the Best Question Ever? How could that simplistic question be the key to consistency in our walk with Christ? To understand

the potency of this question, we need to examine the way we're used to evaluating our options.

WE'RE ASKING THE WRONG QUESTIONS

Typically when making choices, we run our options and opportunities through a more generic and far less helpful grid. There are several variations, but basically the question we ask ourselves is this: *Is there anything wrong with it?*

The assumption is that if there is nothing *wrong* with what we're doing, it must be okay. If it is not illegal, unethical, or immoral, then it qualifies as a live option, right? Biblically speaking, if there is not a "Thou shalt not" associated with it, then it's safe to assume it qualifies as a "Thou certainly shalt if thou please."

Unfortunately, that kind of thinking sets us up for another question that we rarely verbalize or even allow to surface to the level of conscious thought. Yet if we are honest, this is a question that drives far too many of our choices. It goes something like this: *How close can I get to the line between right and wrong without actually doing something wrong?* The Christian version goes like this: *How close can I get to sin without actually sinning?*

This is a question every teenage guy has asked in some way at some point in his dating career. It's a question everyone on a diet asks every day. It is a question attorneys make a living asking on behalf of their clients.

But it doesn't stop there. Inevitably, once we have come this far we find ourselves asking, *How far over the line between right and wrong can I go without experiencing consequences?* In other words, how unethical, immoral, or insensitive can I be without suffering any unmanageable outcomes? How long can I neglect my family, finances, or professional responsibilities without feeling the effects? How far over the speed limit can I drive without getting pulled over? How far can I indulge in an addictive behavior without actually becoming addicted?

It is a slippery slope, both subtle and sinister. It all begins so innocently by asking what seems to be a noble question, *Is there anything wrong with it?* But it ultimately leads to yet another question. One we have all asked at one time or another: *How did I get myself into this mess?*

DAMAGE CONTROL

It's a question I have heard dozens of times. Heck, I've asked myself the same question a dozen times or more. How in the world could someone as smart and biblically astute as me get myself into—well, it's really none of your business what I've gotten myself into. Let's talk about you, or Frank.

Frank is one of the smartest guys I've ever met. Unfortunately, by the time I met him he was attempting to navigate through a labyrinth of sexual addictions, bankruptcy, divorce, and a child custody battle. For forty-five

minutes he poured out his heart. He told me about how he and his wife met: He saw the warning signs but ignored them. He told me about his business partner: Again, he saw red flags but moved ahead anyway. He described his early experiences with pornography: He knew the dangers but figured he would be the exception.

Every bad choice Frank had made could have been avoided if only he had asked the Best Question Ever. His was not an IQ problem. As is the case with most people, his nightmare began with the assumption that he could dance on the edge of moral, relational, and professional disaster and beat the odds. If it wasn't technically "wrong" then it must be "right." Right?

Frank is now in the process of rebuilding his life and marriage. He's asking a different set of questions these days. Things are better. But his new perspective can't erase the pain he has caused his wife and daughter. Hopefully, in time, they will trust him again.

As a pastor, I've heard more than my fair share of heart-breaking stories. Yet every bad decision I have ever heard about could have been avoided if someone had simply asked the Best Question Ever. Every single one. Adultery, addictions, unwanted pregnancies, bankruptcies, you name it. All could have been avoided with a proper application of the Best Question Ever.

The moral of the story is, just because there isn't a "Thou shalt not" attached to a situation does not necessarily mean

it is a “Thou shalt.” What’s morally and culturally permissible is often not what’s best for us.

Like a good father, God wants what’s best for each of us. So He has given us a standard that goes beyond the cultural norms. He has given us a question that enables us to live out the values that lead to what Jesus referred to as an abundant life (see John 10:10). Not a barely-get-by life. Not a life of regret. *An abundant life.*

But the question He gave us is not, *Is there anything wrong with it?* The question is, *Is it the wise thing to do?* To foolproof your life, you must ask it of every invitation, every opportunity, every relationship.

What is the wise thing for me to do?

Think back for a moment to your biggest regret. That event or chapter of your life you wish you could go back and undo or relive. What was the decision you wish you could reverse? The relationship you wish you could do over? Can you see how some or all of what you regret could have been avoided if you had asked and applied the Best Question Ever?

From this moment on, you can avoid the mistakes of the past and live regret free by making it the habit of your life to ask the Best Question Ever.