

“The Will of God” (Part 4)

This is the last in a series of sermons on The Will of God, a series based on Leslie Weatherhead’s classic little book *The Will of God*. Just to briefly review: In the book Weatherhead suggests that it may help if we think of God’s will in this way: there is God’s *intentional will* – that only involves good for us; then there is God’s *circumstantial will* – when the good God intends for us is hindered by evil, or accidents or human errors, this is God’s will *within the new circumstances* created; and there is God’s *ultimate will* – in the end, nothing will ultimately defeat God’s will and purposes for humankind.

Today, we will pick it up from last week’s message where we began to look at ways we can know God’s will for specific situations and decisions we have to make. Yes, there is mystery about God’s ways and we can’t understand everything, but God wants to teach us His will and lead us day by day!

The Old Testament reading today was from Psalm 143. In that Psalm, the writer says, “Show me the way I should go, for to you I entrust my life” (Psalm 143:8). He also writes, “Teach me to do your will, for you are my God” (Psalm 143:10). Teach me to do your will! Show me the way! I hope that is the cry of our heart!

At the end of my message last week I said one of the primary tools God uses to show us His will is *the Bible*. A lot of questions about what God wants and what God doesn’t want can be answered if we just turn to the Bible! It is our “instruction manual” for life! The Bible is the first place to go if we want to be guided in God’s paths and live according to God’s purposes.

But there are other resources that help us discern God’s will. For instance, ***God makes His will known to us through common sense***. God gave us minds to think and reason. God’s will isn’t always conveyed in unusual or uncommon ways. Often using our brain and making common sense choices will lead us down the right paths.

Now it’s true, human reasoning is corrupted and warped by sin. Our judgment in matters is not *always* reliable. Sometimes we are not very bright! We can look at something someone’s done, and be moved to say, “What were they thinking!” I can look at things *I’ve* done or said, and ask, “What was **I** thinking?”

But don’t discount how much God guides us through just using common sense! For instance, if someone who’s got a questionable reputation, who’s failed in every business venture he or she has ever tried, comes to you and wants you to invest in a get rich quick proposition, you don’t have to spend much time praying for God’s guidance in the matter! Use your head!

Now, sometimes God’s will does involve doing something that is the opposite of what common sense would dictate. There are times when the Holy Spirit will lead us to do something that seems irrational, or foolish. Sometimes we have to be a “fool for Christ.” But we ought to be very careful before we jump into something that seems very irrational. Check it out with Scripture. Run it by some trusted friends. *God guides us through common sense.*

Another tool for helping us know God's will is conscience. Conscience is that little voice within us that makes us feel guilty if do something wrong.

Now relying on our conscience to guide us into God's will has its limitations. For one reason, our conscience is shaped to a degree by *culture*. By our *upbringing*. For instance, in some cultures it's ok for a man to have more than one wife, or for people to run around naked. Or, a person might have been raised in a family where his or her parents swore and used vulgar language, or were prejudiced against certain people. So their children grow up thinking that's ok, that's the norm. They have no guilt over this way of living. Then too, sociopaths have little or no conscience – they can hurt or kill people and feel no guilt at all.

But while “letting our conscience be our guide” has its limitations, conscience *can be* a way God speaks to us and helps us distinguish between right and wrong. The Apostle Paul once said, “I do my best always to have a clear conscience toward God and all people” (Acts 24:16). The Bible talks about keeping a good conscience (1 Peter 3:16). For followers of Jesus, conscience, *enlightened and influenced by the Holy Spirit*, can be a valuable way of knowing God's will.

We can also gain insights into God's will by looking at our own uniqueness. How has God created and shaped you? What are your interests? What are your natural abilities? What are your limitations? What are your experiences? It's pretty safe to say if you are a 125 pound weakling God's will isn't that you be a tackle for the Pittsburgh Steelers. If you hate math and can't add 1 plus 1, God doesn't want you to be a math teacher or an accountant. If you couldn't sell a life preserver to a drowning person, I doubt that God wills you to have a career in sales.

Here again, let me add a little side note: There are exceptions, when God wants us to do something for which we seem totally unfit or inadequate. I like to use the example of a friend who felt God's call to preach, but this young man barely made it through high school because of low grades. Yet, this man with ordinary abilities went on to finish college and seminary and did become a pastor.

If we feel God leading us to do something that's a huge stretch for us, or seems out of character, then try it and see what happens! If it is God's will, God will equip us to do what He wants us to do. But generally speaking we can learn a lot about God's will for us if can take an honest look at how God has shaped us: our interests, our abilities, our limitations.

Then, too, God makes His will known to us through other people. Often we are too close to a situation and too emotionally involved to see things clearly. So, a friend, a relative, a counselor can often give us different perspective on a problem or decision we have to make. It is important, however, that the person we talk to be *mature and wise*. A well meaning friend may give us stupid advice. Also it's important that the person we talk with is a person of faith, and sees things through a Christian, biblical perspective.

Talking with a wise and trusted friend or counselor can give us a new angle to problem, and better insight into how God wants us to proceed.

God also makes His will known to us through doors of opportunity. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Corinthian church: “I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, for a wide door for effective work has opened to me...” (1 Corinthians 16:8-9). Sometimes when we’re trying to figure out what God wants us to do, circumstances develop and a door of opportunity presents itself just at the right moment. And we wonder, is this God showing me what to do?

It many cases, it *is*. But before we act too quickly, it’s good to ask certain questions. So, for instance, let’s say we are looking employment, and a door opens to take a certain job. It seems so perfect! Still, we may want to ask: Does this just “feel right”? Is it a good use of my abilities? Can I glorify God in this work? Can it be a blessing to others? Just because an opportunity presents itself does not guarantee that it is God who is opening up that door!

One interesting note here: our Visioning Team has been watching some videos of Adam Hamilton’s keynote addresses when he spoke at Annual Conference a few years ago. In one, he shares how as he reflects over years of having to make decisions in the church and trying to discern God’s will for himself and congregation, almost always doing what God wants has meant taking the harder road (the road less traveled), rather than the easier one - choosing the path that may require more effort and sacrifice, but which in the long run was what God wanted.

And of course, just as God sometimes opens doors of opportunity to lead us in His will, God also at times will close doors. In the Book of Acts, it says this about Paul and Silas: “They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them” (Acts 16:6-7). Two times God closed a door on Paul and Silas. But if you read on, God then directed them to another place for ministry. When doors close on us, we tend to get disheartened. But can we see it as God re-directing us to another option that may even be better!

No doubt there are other ways God directs us into His will, but let me just mention one more tool God uses to show us His will. **God shows us His will in the Quiet Time.** I use this phrase “Quiet Time” to cover a number of personal spiritual disciplines that open us up to the will of God: praying, reading the Bible and devotional literature, meditating and listening for the still, small voice of the Holy Spirit. Practicing these spiritual disciplines daily is a way of “tuning in” to the frequency on which God speaks.

To be honest, many of us American Christians aren’t very good at praying...even less so at meditating and being silent before God. We have overcrowded schedules. We kind of look on time spent praying or just being silent as wasted time – we have to be “doing something”. But if we can make the effort, and commit to the discipline of a daily Quiet Time with God, this will greatly enhance our ability to discern God’s will.

As an ad on to this point of the Quiet Time: Keeping in touch with God throughout the day is a worthwhile practice also. When doing housework, when riding in the car, when at work, when mowing the lawn or gardening – think about God, lift up short prayers, stay in touch with God.

I've found a number of times that God will suddenly put an idea in my head, or plant a thought in my mind that just seems to come from nowhere, and often this has led me to make decisions that are in line with the will of God.

So there you have it! Hopefully these messages have helped us to have a clearer understanding of God's will.

I want to leave us with a question that gets to the heart of the matter: Do you and I really want to know and do God's will? There's the old story of the pastor who was asked to leave the church he was serving, to become pastor of another church where the salary was twice what he was now getting. Being a devout man, this pastor spent long hours in prayer over the matter. One day a friend met the pastor's little daughter on the street and said, "Well, what's your dad going to do?" "Well," the little girl answered, "Daddy's praying, but mommy's packing!"

We can say, "God, teach me your will." But really down inside we may be thinking: "God, this is what I want to do. Please approve my plans!"

I referred to several Scripture verses at the beginning of this message: "Show me the way I should go, for to you I entrust my life" (Psalm 143:8). And this one, "Teach me to do your will, for you are my God" (Psalm 143:10). The Psalm writer in Psalm 143 begs of God, "Please, Lord, teach me to do your will. Show me the way I should go." I hope that's our deepest desire too!

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