

Topic 25: Discerning God's Will

Figuring Out What God Wants You to Do

“Do not conform to the pattern of this world,
but be transformed by the renewing of
your mind. Then you will be able to test
and approve what God's will is—
his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

—Romans 12:2

Read the hypothetical situations described below. Try to identify what these three very different situations have in common.

- ▶ A new bestselling book by a well-known celebrity is creating a firestorm of controversy. Titled *Chruddism* it offers a new kind of spirituality that blends the teachings of Christ with the tenets of Buddhism. Several of your Christian friends have read it, and say they loved it—that it opened up their eyes to some truths they'd never thought of before. What is your response?
- ▶ A bright high-school senior with test scores through the stratosphere has been offered full scholarships to three very different but equally prestigious colleges. There's much to commend each one. She likes them all, and is freaking out about which one is the best decision. What is your advice?
- ▶ You've been asked to help out with the shut-in ministry at your church. There is a huge need there, and you worked with senior citizens when you were in college. Part of you feels like this would be a good thing; another part of you just feels tired and frazzled. Your thoughts vacillate wildly between *I probably should do this* and *I already feel pulled in ten directions*. In the end, what is your response?

Did you figure out the common thread through all these examples? In each of the situations above, what's needed is *discernment*.

1. Name a situation in your life that causes you to struggle with what's right and true, or what may be the best course of action.



What Is Discernment?

Biblically speaking, discernment is the ability God's Spirit gives us to distinguish and decide between that which is true, wise, and good and that which is false, foolish, and evil.

God wants *all* of his children to have and exercise this ability. Consider these passages from the apostle Paul, written to the ancient Christians in Colossae and Philippi:

- ▶ "So, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding" (Colossians 1:9, *ESV*).
- ▶ "This is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ" (Philippians 1:9–10).

Bible Study

2. What does Paul request for Christians here? What ability does he want them to develop?

In 1 Corinthians 12, the apostle Paul discusses spiritual gifts—special God-given abilities for building up the body of Christ. Here we discover some Christians are given a special ability to discern between right and wrong, spiritual truth and spiritual error. It's like the Holy Spirit functions in their life like a built-in "bad theology detector."

"He gives one person the power to perform miracles, and another the ability to prophesy. He gives someone else the ability to discern whether a message is from the Spirit of God or from another spirit. Still another person is given the ability to speak in unknown languages, while another is given the ability to interpret what is being said."
(1 Corinthians 12:10, *NLT*)

3. Do you know any Christians with this extra-special ability to correctly analyze situations and messages and say, "That's a bad idea" or "That works well with biblical teachings"? Give an example or two.



What Is True, Wise, and Good

Here are four truths about figuring out what is true, wise, and good:

Truth #1: God's will is discernible.

Some believers act like God's will is accessible only to a few eccentric spiritual geniuses who have figured out how to "hack into the Almighty's heavenly database."

Not true. God is not trying to turn our lives into a frustrating search. We can discern his purposes for us. He *wants* us to know his will—so that we can do it!

4. Look at what our memory verse for this lesson tells us: "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will" (Romans 12:2).

How would you explain this verse to a child?

Clearly God desires for us to know his will today. He may not reveal his will for tomorrow, next month, or next year. But he gives us what we need to know now. We see this in the prayer of the Spirit-led psalmist: "Teach me to do Your will, for You are my God; let Your good Spirit lead me on level ground" (Psalm 143:10, NASB).

Truth #2: God's will is good.

Now we get to the heart of the issue. So many times Christians cringe at the phrase "the will of God," because they equate that with hard or bad things (see "Dangerous Assumptions About the Will of God"). We assume that if we seek hard after God's will, we just might find it, and that will involve all sorts of unpleasantness!

Dangerous Assumptions About the Will of God

- He probably wants to send me to someplace miserable.
- I'll have to marry a boring, mean, or unattractive person. Or I'll never get married!
- He'll have me do something dreadful—something that I hate.
- His plans for my life won't be nearly as exciting as *my* plans for my life.
- I'll probably end up poor.
- Obeying God will take all the fun out of life.
- He'll make me suffer.
- His will likely involves a frustrating existence in a foreign country.



5. Consider the following passages:

- ▶ “For the LORD God is a sun and shield; the LORD bestows favor and honor; no good thing does he withhold from those whose walk is blameless” (Psalm 84:11).
- ▶ “Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good; his love endures forever” (Psalm 107:1).
- ▶ “‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ says the LORD. ‘They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope’” (Jeremiah 29:11, NLT).
- ▶ “He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” (Romans 8:32).

What conclusions might we draw from these passages about the will of God?

Someone has observed, if we really believed our heavenly Father’s character is 100-percent good, every hour of every day, we’d trust his will, no matter what. And if we trusted his heart, we would *do* his will eagerly, as Jesus did (Matthew 26:42).

Here’s what we have to believe: In following the way of Christ wholeheartedly, we find a life that simultaneously honors God, blesses others, and brings happiness to our own soul. Outside of embracing and doing the will of a good God, we will never find all of that.

6. Why is it a struggle for people to believe in God’s love and care for us?

Truth #3: Discerning God’s will requires God’s resources.

These resources include God’s Word, God’s Spirit, as well as other resources.

God’s Word

God doesn’t give his children a detailed blueprint for life. Nobody gets a comprehensive itinerary for the next twenty, forty, or sixty years. Instead God gave us his Word.



What exactly is the Bible? Maybe we should start with what the Bible is not. It's not a day-planner. It's not going to give you explicit instructions for every situation of life—like whether you should wear your red shirt or your green one!

Rather, the Bible is the wild-but-true story of God. It's like a photograph album or scrapbook of sorts. It gives us glimpses and remembrances of what God is like and how he's acted in history. It's also a love letter full of divine promises. And further, it's a show-and-tell of the best and worst ways to live.

7. What would happen to our relationship with God if instead of the Bible, God gave each of his children a personalized app that dinged and buzzed moment-by-moment to tell us exactly what to think, do, and say in every situation?

8. It has been said, "About ninety percent of God's will for our lives is already spelled out in his Word. The other ten percent is just details." Based on what you know of God's Word, what are some things that you know for sure are the will of God for your life today?

A Couple of Discernment Reminders:

- When you embark on a new path that you really sense is God's will and some people push back, be firm but gracious. Say something like: "I may not be hearing perfectly from God, but I am going this direction because at this moment, this is what I genuinely believe God is leading me to do."¹
- Sometimes God leads us down paths that are hard or seem like big mistakes. We can't measure the will of God by how things look in the moment. If you're in that spot, follow the next thing God reveals. If you keep trusting and walking, by the end of your life (or at least in the life to come), you will be able to see how God used even those painful periods for his glory, and yours and others' good.

¹ If ten of your wisest, most trusted friends are discouraging your chosen course of action, that's a different story!



God's Spirit

9. Read these words of Jesus:

"When he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come." (John 16:13)

What is the role of the Holy Spirit in helping us discern God's truth and/or God's will?

10. In John 16, Jesus talks about "the Spirit of Truth." In John 17, Jesus says, "Your Word is truth" (v. 17). Do you think there could ever be a time when God's Spirit and God's Word would lead us in two different ways?

We want to be able to see our whole future in front of us. We'd prefer a detailed itinerary for life. Instead, God gives us a flashlight and a reliable guide. The flashlight is his Word (see Psalm 119:105), and the guide is his Spirit. That's because he wants us to "live by faith, not by sight" (2 Corinthians 5:7). We need to make our decision on what is revealed to us today. God may take us another direction tomorrow, but that's okay. Remember: God is not trying to hide his will. He wants you to know his will for you today more than you seek to know it.



Other Resources for Discerning the Will of God

Tool	Definition	Danger
<p>Godly counsel “Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed” (Proverbs 15:22).</p>	Seeking input and advice from spiritually wise friends and experienced mentors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ People are fallible and sometimes suggest wrong or unwise actions. ▶ We tend to gravitate toward those who will tell us what we want to hear
<p>Sovereign circumstances “We may throw the dice, but the Lord determines how they fall” (Proverbs 16:33, NLT; see also Romans 8:28 and Ecclesiastes 7:13-14).</p>	Observing life events and prayerfully considering how God might be leading you through his providential acts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Obstacles don’t always mean “stop.” ▶ Open doors don’t always mean “go.”
<p>Holy contentment “Let the peace that comes from Christ rule in your hearts” (Colossians 3:15, NLT).</p>	Paying close attention to your heart and to the course of action that brings an undeniable sense of “peace” and/or rightness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Sometimes God’s will is scary and not peaceful—consider Jesus wrestling with God’s will and sweating blood in Gethsemane (Luke 22:44).
<p>Divine compulsions “Now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there” (Acts 20:22; see also Romans 8:14).</p>	Noticing inner promptings, checks on your spirit, impressions, or “nudges” by the Holy Spirit to do (or not do) a certain thing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ Not every internal urge is from God. ▶ Any whim or notion needs to be prayerfully and carefully analyzed in light of God’s Word—that’s part of discernment!
<p>Common sense “Good sense is a fountain of life to him who has it, but the instruction of fools is folly” (Proverbs 16:22, ESV).</p>	Taking into account reason, facts, and logic. For example, realizing as a 6-foot 6-inch, 250-pound guy, you probably weren’t meant for a career as a jockey	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ God’s ways are higher than ours. ▶ Sometimes God’s might seem crazy. For example, having your fiancée tell you that God made her pregnant—Matthew 1:18-19.

11. What’s your experience with discerning God’s will via these means?



12. How could you use these tools and resources in your current search to know God's will in a certain situation?

Here's a final truth about discovering the truth and/or will of God.

Truth #4: Discerning God's will requires effort on our part.

Much of God's will for your life is already quite clear.

- ▶ You were *created* to:
 - ◆ Glorify God (Isaiah 43:7)
 - ◆ Love him with all your heart (Mark 12:28–30)
- ▶ You've been *called* to:
 - ◆ Follow Jesus and help others learn to do likewise (Matthew 28:18–20)
- ▶ You're *commanded* to:
 - ◆ Love others (John 13:34–35)
 - ◆ Serve others with all the blessings God has given you (1 Peter 4:11).

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding. Seek his will in all you do, and he will show you which path to take” (Proverbs 3:5–6, NLT).

God always speaks clearly, but we don't always hear clearly.

Those things will always be true, no matter where you go to college, whom you marry, what career you choose, or where you decide to live. In other words, most of the “what?” is clear. All that remains now is discovering the details (How? Where? When? With whom?).

This involves cultivating the ability to use the resources God has given to develop the ability to hear God's voice and follow his specific leaning. What's your part in discovering those details?

Pray

“If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you. But when you ask, you must believe and not doubt, because the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That person should not expect to receive anything from the Lord” (James 1:5–7).



13. According to James, why is believing in God's generosity important for someone seeking God's direction?

Recognize and Relinquish

Because of our unique personalities and life experiences, we each have tendencies, biases, predispositions, "default" ways of reacting, unconscious habits, and compulsive behaviors (sometimes bordering on addiction).

For example, maybe your natural instinct is to play the role of rescuer, and so you keep falling into bad relationships. Or maybe because of your own chaotic childhood you have a tendency to try to control everything about your own child's life. If so, it could be that some of your parenting decisions are rooted more in fear than in the will of God. Or maybe your high salary is less a blessing to you, and more a master—so that when the opportunity arises for you to pursue your dream job (at about half the income), you feel like you can't even consider it. You get antsy, even terrified at the thought of walking away from such a financial safety net. Maybe, in truth, it's money, not God, that's directing your life.

Whatever your particular struggle, it's important to recognize it. Only by first identifying the deep issues of your heart, can you consciously relinquish those things and trust God. Some struggles are long-term, or as C. S. Lewis calls them, "afflictions." In those instances, recognizing and relinquishing is a continual process.

14. What is one tendency or natural instinct you have that probably fights against your ability to discern the will of God in your life?



Take-Home Reflections

Take Action

Someone has wisely noted that it's impossible to steer a parked car. Get moving on the clear things. Stop waiting for a detailed twenty-year plan (that's never going to drop from heaven). Instead, trust God and take a step of faith. Then another and another. All along the way, ask the Lord to guide you and re-route you if you get off course. Don't get fixated on the destination you imagine, or you will end up feeling hurt and betrayed by God.

Sometimes God leads us down paths that don't appear to turn out well. That's okay.

Just follow the next thing God reveals. By the end of your life, you will see how the painful things in life are also used by God.

Unlike the original followers of Christ, we do not have Jesus physically with us. We don't have the privilege of watching and listening to him talk in person. We live in a loud, noisy world that offers us a million options.

And so we need discernment. We need to cultivate the ability to open the Word of the Lord and be sensitive to the Spirit of the Lord. That's how we know what's true, and what we need to do.

Life Application

An important part of discipleship is learning how to apply God's truths to your life. Below are just a few ways you can start thinking about what you've learned and apply it to your daily life.

1. Memorize our verse, Romans 12:2:
2. Review the table on the next page, "When God's Will Isn't Black and White."
3. Wrestle with one or two of these questions:
 - ▶ Why is it often so hard to know what is the best course of action?
 - ▶ What do you think of the statement that if we are not already doing the things God has clearly shown us to do, why would he reveal any more of his will for our lives?

- ▶ How can other spiritual practices like solitude and silence (Topic 22) or fasting (Topic 26) be helpful in hearing God and finding guidance for life?
- ▶ How do you handle conflicting feelings and competing impulses?
- ▶ What big, confusing decisions are you facing now?
- ▶ If you are at a crossroads, answer these questions: What gives you a deep sense of joy, significance, and satisfaction? What habits and activities do you walk away from saying, "I sense God's pleasure every time I do that"?
- ▶ Do you think you have the spiritual gift of discernment?

If you love God, you'll stop in the right place even if you make mistakes along the way.



When God's Will Isn't Black and White

The Bible gives explicit instruction regarding lots of things. What about when we're facing a choice the Scriptures don't specifically address? Consider these ten principles in trying to discern what to do.

Ask Yourself	Scripture	Principle
Will this bring glory to God?	1 Corinthians 10:31	I am to live my life in such a way that God always gets the glory he deserves.
Am I trusting God, relying on my own wisdom, or trying to please someone else?	Proverbs 3:5-6, NLT; cf. 2 Corinthians 5:9-10	Biblical faith resists both the temptation to be a "men-pleaser" and the urge to rely on worldly wisdom.
Is this a case of "If it seems too good to be true, it probably is"?	Proverbs 14:12	We live in a confusing world influenced by a destructive deceiver whose goal is to ruin our lives. We should be careful and prayerful!
Could my faith be damaged or my character corrupted by this choice?	1 Corinthians 15:33	I will be influenced by environments I choose and the company I keep.
How does this square with my calling to pursue holiness?	1 Peter 1:14-15	As disciples, we are called to be different (in attitudes and actions) from those around us.
Would this decision harm Christ's reputation or my own as his disciple?	Ephesians 5:3	We must be above reproach in all we do.
Could this be the first step on the path to spiritual or moral danger?	Proverbs 4:14-15	We must be alert, recognizing the weakness of our flesh and the power of sinful desires.
Would this action send the wrong signal to a "weaker" believer who might copy my behavior and violate his or her conscience?	1 Corinthians 8:9	The law of love requires that I sometimes voluntarily (and selflessly) limit my freedom for the sake of others.
Even if this isn't "sinful," is it "wise"?	1 Corinthians 10:23	Some things are "okay," others are "good," and still others are "best." Disciples are called to pursue the best!
Do older and wiser believers agree with my chosen course of action?	Proverbs 12:17	It is foolish (and prideful) not to seek out and heed the wise counsel of godly men and women we respect when facing a tough decision.