

How Do I Find God's Will In Difficult Situations?

April 22, 2018

Welcome back to CrossWinds after our snow day Sunday last week. It is hard to believe we have sun this week when we had a blizzard last week! The first thing I need everyone to do is take out their sermon handouts. Hold them in the air when you have them. Now, I need you to change the date. Today is not April 15. It is April 22. Don't worry, tax day only came once this year. Paying taxes is hard enough; we don't need to do it twice.

This morning, we continue our series on discovering God's will. Two weeks ago, we learned we don't discover God's will the way the ancient pagans did. We don't find God's will through astronomy or by checking animal livers. We also don't find God's will the way it was done in the Old Testament. We don't roll the Urim and Thummim. In New Testament times, God has us on a completely different plan. Now that we have the Holy Spirit in our lives, as we read the Word of God, the Holy Spirit applies the Word of God to our lives. As we read, pray, meditate and memorize the word, God's Holy Spirit uses the Word of God to shape us to be more like Jesus. He uses the Word to convict us of sin. He uses the Word to think more like Jesus. The interaction between the Spirit of God and the Word of God forms in our hearts the desire God has for our lives. God plants in us the desires he has for us. When it comes to knowing and following the will of God, most of the time it is as simple as following the God-given desires of our hearts. We simply do what we want to do because God places in our hearts desires that follow after his will for our lives.

Augustine in the early church said this when he was asked how a Christian finds God's will for his or her life. He said all we need to do is love God then do what we want. As we walk with God, what we want to do becomes what God wants us to do. As Cornelius Van Til often said, we learn to think God's thoughts after him. That is the way God reveals his will for our lives 95 percent of the time.

What about the remaining 5 percent of decisions where we don't know what God wants us to do? What about choices where God's Word does not speak clearly? What about choices where after reading, praying and meditating on God's Word, we don't know what to choose? Those are the difficult decisions we will talk about this morning.

To tackle tough decisions, I want you to reframe the question. Instead of asking yourself, "What is God's will in the situation?" ask yourself, "What is a good choice in this situation?" Asking ourselves, "What is God's will?" leaves you passive. Asking ourselves, "What is a good choice?" makes us active. We know it is God's will for us to make good choices. Asking that question often allows us to make progress on the difficult situations where we are not sure God's will for our lives.

For example, when Paul talks about marriage, he gives us great freedom. He only gives one stipulation. A Christian single must marry another Christian. After that, the Bible doesn't say much.

A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. 1 Corinthians 7:39 (ESV)

If you are a Christian single, as long as you marry another Christian single, you are inside of God's will for your life. When we change the question, to "What is a good choice when it comes to a marriage partner?" things change in a hurry. We all know there are some Christians that are much better marriage material than other Christians.

You see, "Is it God's will for me to marry this person?" doesn't always help us find God's will. The better question of, "Is it wise for me to marry this person?" helps us discern God's will, because we know God wants us to make good and wise decisions. Almost all of the tough decisions about God's will that we can't answer can be pressed through if we focus on making a good and wise decision.

This morning, we are going to look at how to make good decisions, because making a good decision is always God's will.

1. Don't make decisions that pull me away from Christ.

Will it build me up?

"I have the right to do anything," you say—but not everything is beneficial. "I have the right to do anything"—but not everything is constructive. 1 Corinthians 10:23 (NIV)

There are choices we can make in life that are not necessarily wrong, but if we choose them, they won't be helpful. The choices we make should improve us and improve our ability to serve Christ, not take away our ability to serve the Lord. Ask yourself, when it comes to my relationship with Christ, is this choice beneficial? Is this choice constructive? In this tough decision, which choice will help me burn hotter for Jesus? Look what Paul said about life.

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize. 1 Corinthians 9:24 (NIV)

Every one of us is in the race of life. Some of us will be on the track 50 years. Others 60, 70 or even 90. We need to remember life is not a waltz. It is a race. We are running to please Jesus. We are running to tell more people about the good news of Jesus. Since life is a race and we have a goal, we need to run to win. That should change the way we choose what we do with our time. There are plenty of television programs, but we need to ask ourselves, is what I am watching building me up? Is it helping me follow Jesus? There are plenty of things to look at on the Internet. Is what I am looking at on the Internet helping me to follow Jesus? When you read a book, when you watch a television program or movie, we need to ask ourselves, is this building me up or tearing me down in the race of life where I am running for the prize of pleasing Jesus? Many things in life are not wrong, but they are not constructive or beneficial.

Will it slow me down?

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us... Hebrews 12:1 (NIV)

The writer of Hebrews also describes life as a race. He reminds us that since we are running in a race, there are two things we should get rid of from our lives: 1) The sin that so easily entangles, 2) Everything that hinders. The sin that easily entangles is like running with your shoelaces untied. At first, you are making good progress and the untied laces are only a minor inconvenience, but when you least expect it, you step on one and trip yourself up. You face plant in the ground. That is the way it works with tolerating sin in our lives. We think we can manage it but when we least expect it, the sin trips us up in ways we never expected.

The other things he tells us to get rid of in the race of life is anything that hinders us. That literally means any weights or burdens that slow us down. There are things in this life that are not wrong but they are not a wise because they slow you down in the race of life when it comes to pleasing Jesus and following Jesus.

For example, my daughter is involved in track. She runs the hurdles. There is no rule that says she is not allowed to wear her brother's combat boots when she runs. However, it is unwise to wear them. It is foolish to wear them. She will never win a race if she wears them, but they are not wrong. They just slow her way down. In the same way, when it comes to the Christian life there are many things in this world that are not wrong, but they can slow us way down if we let them into our lives. For example, some friends are not wrong but you find they slow you down in your faith. They are constant introducing you to things that the Holy Spirit reminds you are not wise. Sometimes we get ourselves involved in sports or extracurricular activities that run us ragged and we have no time for Bible study, church or rest. Overcommitment can seriously slow us down in our walks with Christ.

Will it lead me into bondage?

"All things are lawful for me," but not all things are helpful. "All things are lawful for me," but I will not be dominated by anything. 1 Corinthians 6:12 (ESV)

Paul said there are many things we can do in life but not everything is helpful. Many things in life can enslave us. It is not God's will that we allow anything to enslave us. This obviously means it is not God's will for a Christian to let themselves become addicted to drugs. It also means it is not God's will that

alcohol would control our lives. Many of us have seen the devastation of alcoholism. Paul's words refer to more than just drugs and alcohol. For many of us, we find ourselves obsessed with a hobby or centering our lives around a person. For others of us, we are controlled by our smartphones or our social media. We live for likes and retweets.

If something is beginning to master or control us, it is not a good decision or a wise decision to let ourselves become increasingly centered around something that is enslaving us.

2. Lean into my gifts.

For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother's womb... Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.
Psalm 139:16 (ESV)

God created each of us the way he wants us. If we were in charge of creating ourselves, we would have made ourselves taller, skinnier and smarter. God made you just the way he wants you to be. God didn't make a mistake when he made you. God doesn't make mistakes. He made you exactly the way he wants you to be, plus, he made you exactly the way he wants you to be with all the gifts and abilities you need to fulfill the will he has for your life.

God didn't just craft us exactly the way he wants us to be physically and intellectually, but he also gave us different skills and talents. Some of us are great at sports. Some of us excel at music and drama. God gave us the gifts he wants us to have for a reason. They are the gifts we need to fulfill the mission he has for our lives. A big part of understanding God's will for your life and making good decisions that follow God's will is leaning into the gifts and talents God gave you.

He gave them to you for a reason. He gave them to you to enable you to fulfill his will for your life.

Not only did God give each of us different gifts and talents but as Christians, he also gave each of us spiritual gifts in addition to our natural gifts.

Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them: if prophecy, in proportion to our faith; if service, in our serving; the one who teaches, in his teaching; the one who exhorts, in his exhortation; the one who contributes, in generosity; the one who leads, with zeal; the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness. Romans 12:6–8 (ESV)

When it comes to discerning God's will for our lives and making good decisions in line with God's will, we need to understand our gifts, our talents and the spiritual gifts God provided so we can lean into those gifts. God gave us those gifts because it is God's will that we use them for his glory in our lives. Some of us are great mechanically. Lean into that gift. Some of us are great musically. Make good choices that lean into that gift. God made you the way he wants you for a reason. It is God's will that you make choices that head in the direction of your gifts, your talents and your shape.

I know many of us agree with this. The big question is, "What should I do when I don't know my shape, my talents and my gifts?" Let me give you some help when it comes to recognizing your gifts. Ask yourself these questions.

What do I enjoy doing?

Sometimes the easiest place to start when it comes to discerning our God-given gifts and talents is simply asking ourselves what we like to do. Where do you find yourself energized? Many times what you enjoy doing helps reveal the way God made you.

If you struggle to understand what you enjoy in life, you can take tests online like the *Strength Finder* test or the *Taylor Johnson Temperament analysis*. They help us understand our natural shape.

Another way to reveal the gifts and talents God gave you is to talk to your friends.

What gifts and passions do my friends notice?

Let another praise you, and not your own mouth; a stranger, and not your own lips. Proverbs 27:2 (ESV)

Better is open rebuke than hidden love. Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy. Proverbs 27:5–6 (ESV)

Ask people you respect what they see in you. They can provide you with insight that you don't have about yourself. I say this with the caveat that we need to know who to seek advice from when it comes to helping us understand our gifts and talents. This is especially true if you are young. Your young friends may mean well but they often don't have enough experience in life to recommend well. The most accurate reading of your gifts and talents will most likely come from your parents or older adults who know you. They have enough experience in life to see how your gifts and talents connect in the adult world.

What should I do when I am living outside my gifts and talents?

There is one qualification to this, especially when you are young. Many of us will find ourselves working in a career or serving in a business that eventually doesn't fit our natural shape. You may find yourself working at Jimmy John's. You thought you liked food service, but after a few weeks you can't stand it. What should we do when we find ourselves operating outside our gifts and talents? Realize that is OK. Many times God puts us in places that are not a natural fit so

we can recognize a natural fit when we find it. For example, you may never have known that construction wasn't your fit if you didn't try it only to discover you were not good at it.

In addition, some of the greatest steps of maturity happen in our lives when we are forced to serve outside of an area of natural giftedness. God uses those hard times to change us in ways we would never change if we only had the good times.

Why do I always need to qualify my gifts with an honest evaluation of my ability?

...Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you. Romans 12:3 (NIV)

Once you know your gifts and passions and you start leaning into them, make sure you are honest with yourself about the amount of your giftedness God has given you. Some people have 10-star gifts and talents. Many of us have gifts and skills but we are not nearly as gifted as others. Maybe we only have five or six stars. Don't be despondent over this. That is OK. Remember God made us just the way he wants us to be. He didn't just give us the gifts and talents he wants us to have but he also gave us the exact amount of gifts and talents we need to accomplish his will for our lives.

Too many of us tie our self-images to our gifts and talents. If we are not the absolute best at everything, we struggle with self-image. Folks, our self-image is not to be found in what we do. It is to be found in Jesus and who we are in him. Since Jesus chose us and loves us, that gives us a healthy self-image. Being the best at everything gives us a shaky self-image.

God doesn't give everyone rockstar levels of gifts and talents. That is OK. He just wants us to do the absolute best with the gifts and talents he gave us.

Just because you are good at cooking doesn't mean you need to have your own cooking television show. Very few people have that level of giftedness. Maybe you are moderately gifted at cooking but it is to bless your family.

Maybe you are gifted at singing. It is OK if you are not gifted enough to have your own album. God gave you a moderate level of gifting to be used to bless other people in a different way.

You are not a failure if your gifts are not the greatest or the best. Be grateful for the amount of gifts God gave you. Don't obsess over needing to be the most spectacular person in the room when it comes to your gift. That is idolatry.

3. Listen to your dreams and burdens.

While God can literally speak through dreams, most of the time God speaks to us by giving us a burden for what could be. We see a need, and God gives us a desire to meet the need.

Billy Graham had a burden for sharing the good news of Jesus with people who hadn't heard about Jesus. Graham leaned into that burden. That was God's will for his life. We know the rest of the story.

God gives some people a burden for missions. God gives other people a burden for missions in a particular country. Other people have a God-given burden to reach their community. Some people have a God-given burden to help couples in struggling marriages. When God gives you a burden, that is one of the

ways God reveals his will for your life. Respond to your God-given burdens. Lean into them.

Nehemiah was a cup bearer to the king of Persia around 450 B.C. A cup bearer was a high-ranking officer in the Persian royal courts. He served the king his drink. It was his duty to sample wine before it was served to the king, that way the king knew it wasn't poisoned. Obviously, a cupbearer needed to be extremely trustworthy. One day, King Artaxerxes noticed Nehemiah was sad. He asked what he could do to cheer him up. After praying, Nehemiah told the king he was sad because the defensive wall around Jerusalem was in ruins. He wanted to rebuild it. The king granted him permission to rebuild the wall. Look how Nehemiah described the burden he felt in his heart to rebuild the wall.

Then I arose in the night, I and a few men with me. And I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem... Nehemiah 2:12 (ESV)

God is the one who put this burden in his heart. God's will for his life was found when he tried to address his God-given burden. God's will for our lives is often found by responding to particular burdens God placed in our hearts. If God has given you a particular desire to build something, that is one of the ways God reveals his will for your life.

4. It is always God's will that I go out of my way to love people.

The Bible tells us again and again that love is the key to fulfilling God's will. In at least eight separate places, the Bible tells us we are to love God and love our neighbors.

Paul wrote in Romans 13:10 that love is the fulfillment of the law. In Galatians 5:22, Paul said love is the fruit of the Spirit. When it comes to decisions

that are not clear and we don't know God's will, it is always God's will for us to make the decision that loves people.

Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Philippians 2:4 (ESV)

God's will is that the decisions we make are the most loving and caring decisions we can make toward others, not necessarily the decisions that are easiest or best for ourselves. Whenever we are unsure of God's will in a situation, ask yourself what is the most loving action toward other people. We know it is always God's will that we act like Christ and put the interests of others in front of our own.

Haddon Robinson, one of my professors, told how he and his wife took care of their aging parents. His wife's mother came down with cancer right after they moved to Denver. After praying about it, rather than leaving her in an institution, they felt God wanted them to take her into their home. His wife provided her mother with 24-hour care for the last 18 months of her life until she passed into the arms of Jesus. He describes that as one of the most difficult seasons in their marriage. The decision to have his dying mother-in-law in their home wasn't the easiest decision. It was the most loving decision, so they sensed that was God's will for them in that season of their life.

Many people want to make good choices, but few people want to make the sacrificial choices that are most loving for other people, yet, that is usually God's will for their lives.

When you don't know God's will, ask yourself what the most loving thing you can do for someone is. Ask yourself what the most sacrificial thing you can do for someone is. That is probably God's will.

5. Seek wise counsel when facing tough decisions.

God put us in community. He desires for us to seek wisdom from others when we face tough decisions. The first place for us to seek wisdom when facing tough decisions is in the church.

Seek wise counsel in your church.

And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. Hebrews 10:24–25 (ESV)

When Christians come together, they are like a campfire. As long as the logs are together, they burn bright and hot. When you take a burning log out of the fire, they cool to the point they smoke and smolder. Without the warmth of the other logs, they can't burn hot and bright. In the same way, Christians need to be with one another in the church to burn hot and bright for Jesus. We need one another to encourage one another.

In the same way, we need one another when facing tough decisions. One of the reasons God put us together in the church is so we can go to one another for wisdom and counsel when we face hard decisions. We encourage one another as we stir one another up to love and good works.

Get a second opinion.

Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety. Proverbs 11:14 (ESV)

When we go to the doctor, often it is wise to get a second opinion. One doctor will notice things another doctor missed. In the same way, when we are facing a challenging decision and we are not sure how to make a good decision and follow God's will for our lives, one of the best ways to make a good decision is not just to ask for counsel and advice from one person in your church but go to multiple people for advise in the church. Each one will provide you with different pieces of wisdom so you can make a good decision.

One of my favorite trips each year is a meeting called Team 500. It is a gathering of pastors from churches our size in the EFCA denomination. We talk about the challenges we are facing and get the wisdom of the 25 pastors in the room. Interestingly, no one pastor has all the answers. There is great wisdom in the collective answer of the group. In the same way, when we are facing tough choices where it is hard to make a good decision, the best way to make a good decision is to ask multiple godly people and take what bits of wisdom you can learn from each of them.

Seek counsel from mature people.

When it comes to seeking counsel, make sure you solicit counsel from wise mature people. It is easy to solicit advice from people that want to talk. It is harder to find advice from people where it is worth listening to what they have to say.

King Rehoboam is an example of this in 1 Kings 12. He was the son of King Solomon, who ruled in his father's place. When he began his rule, he laid a

heaven burden on the people. The problem was the nation was exhausted from King Solomon's ambitious building projects. They said,

"Your father made our yoke heavy. Now therefore lighten the hard service of your father and his heavy yoke on us, and we will serve you." 1 Kings 12:4 (ESV)

This could have been Rehoboam's finest hour. If he was considerate of their need for a break, they would have been loyal to him like they were to his father. Before he made his decision, he sought advice. Like we learned, he sought advice from multiple sources. The first advice he received was from the older and wiser men who advised his father. This is what they said:

And they said to him, "If you will be a servant to this people today and serve them, and speak good words to them when you answer them, then they will be your servants forever." 1 Kings 12:7 (ESV)

In other words, "They are right. They need a break. Slow down the pace of life."

Rehoboam didn't just ask for advice from the wise older men. He asked for advice from the young bucks that were his teenage friends. They were thrilled to have Rehoboam ruling the nation. They encouraged him to leverage his position of authority.

And the young men who had grown up with him said to him, "Thus shall you speak to this people who said to you, 'Your father made our yoke heavy, but you lighten it for us,' thus shall you say to them, 'My little finger is thicker than my father's thighs. And now, whereas my father laid on you a heavy yoke, I will add to your yoke. My father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions.'" 1 Kings 12:10–11 (ESV)

In other words, "If you think my father was tough, you haven't seen anything. I am tougher. I am harder. I am meaner." As a result of Rehoboam choosing to follow the advice of immature people, the people of the nation rebelled. Ten of the 12 tribes walked away. Israel split into a northern and

southern kingdom. They remained in civil war for generations. Thousands upon thousands died.

It all started when Rehoboam wanted to get advice from people who weren't qualified to give advice. He wanted to listen to his immature friends instead of older, mature, wiser people.

Seek counsel that isn't just what you want to hear.

In the final chapter of 1 Kings, we find an example of someone who sought advice, but in reality, he just wanted advice that confirmed the decision he already made. That man was Ahab. The story opens as Ahab, King of Israel, entered into an alliance with Jehoshaphat, King of Judah, apparently through a marriage. Wanting to formalize the alliance, Ahab urged Jehoshaphat to join him in a battle against the Arameans.

Jehoshaphat came to Samaria to meet Ahab and plan the battle. After they made their plans, Jehoshaphat reminded Ahab they never sought God's guidance before going to war. Ahab was prepared. He had assembled the national council of the prophets, 400 strong. He went to them and told them of his plans for war. All of them agreed with him. The vote was 400 to zero in favor of what Ahab had already decided.

For some reason, Jehoshaphat wasn't convinced. He asked Ahab if there was any other prophet of the Lord from whom they could inquire. Ahab responded this way.

And the king of Israel said to Jehoshaphat, "There is yet one man by whom we may inquire of the Lord, Micaiah the son of Imlah, but I hate him, for he never prophesies good concerning me, but evil." And Jehoshaphat said, "Let not the king say so." 1 Kings 22:8 (ESV)

Notice the reason King Ahab hadn't called Micaiah earlier. He wasn't called because he often didn't say what King Ahab wanted to hear. Micaiah was called. He was asked to stand before the two kings and announce God's will. "Should we go to war?" Ahab asked. "Attack and be victorious!" Micaiah answered. Micaiah had spoken sarcastically, and Ahab knew it. Ahab demanded that Micaiah tell the truth.

Micaiah told them the truth. He told the kings that he saw Israel scattered on the hills like sheep without a shepherd. In other words, Micaiah promised that if Ahab and Jehoshaphat went to war, the results would be disastrous. Their leadership over the people would be destroyed.

Then he told a story — one of the stranger stories in the Old Testament.

And Micaiah said, "Therefore hear the word of the Lord: I saw the Lord sitting on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing beside him on his right hand and on his left; and the Lord said, 'Who will entice Ahab, that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-gilead?' And one said one thing, and another said another. Then a spirit came forward and stood before the Lord, saying, 'I will entice him.' And the Lord said to him, 'By what means?' And he said, 'I will go out, and will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.' And he said, 'You are to entice him, and you shall succeed; go out and do so.'" 1 Kings 22:19–22 (ESV)

What are we to make of this story? First, let us remember this isn't history. It is a story. I don't think God sits on his throne and solicits advice from spirits on how to destroy kings. The purpose of the story is the force of the story. The force of the story is that Ahab wanted to believe a lie. Since he wanted to believe a lie, he only listened to people that would tell him what he wanted to hear. His mind was already made up. Ahab didn't care about the truth.

As the chapter continues, we see how strongly Ahab wanted to believe his own life rather than genuinely hear anyone else's advice. Even after the warning

of a prophet from God, Ahab went to battle. He took the precautionary step of disguising himself, hoping he could ward off death.

Ahab's plan failed. An Aramean archer randomly shot an arrow into the air. It landed in Ahab's belly. What was seemingly random chance crossed paths with God's sovereign decree. Ahab died, just as Micaiah said he would.

Don't miss the force of the story. If we only want advice from people that will reinforce what we already people, the results will be disastrous. When it comes to seeking advice, we need to be genuinely willing to take advice.

Conclusion

Many people look back at the first century as a time when God mysteriously and supernaturally directed early Christians and the church. That is not true. When we examine God's Word, we find the early Christians often made tough decisions about God's will the same way we do. They put their fingers in the text. They sought wisdom from other godly people. They prayed, and then they made a good and wise choice.

This week, if you find yourself unsure of God's will in a tough situation, change the question from, "What is God's will?" to "What does a good choice and a wise choice look like in this situation?" Changing the question to, "What does a good choice and wise decision look like?" will often guide you through the most perplexing questions we face.



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