

WHAT IS GOD'S WILL FOR ME?

EPHESIANS 5:15-17

Anthony Oliveri was riding his Harley Davidson motorcycle down a busy street in Indiana when he was struck by another vehicle. Afterwards, he said, "I didn't quite know what was going on for a split second. I looked back around my left shoulder. All I see is her tire and the left bumper getting ready to run me over." Interestingly, both drivers attributed the crash to God's will. The driver of the automobile didn't stop, but police located her a few miles from the accident. When she was asked to explain her actions, she had an interesting response, "God told me to let Him take the wheel." Police summarized her statement this way: "She was driving and out of nowhere God told her that He would take it from here and she let go of the wheel and let Him take it." By contrast, Oliveri said, "I was inches from that bumper and I just said to myself today is the day I die. I just shut my eyes and said if this is the way God wants to do it then I guess that this is the way we're going to do it." Later on, however, he attributed his survival to God's will. Both people had some interesting beliefs about the will of God.

God's will has fascinated, intrigued, troubled, and frustrated followers of Jesus all at the same time. Today I'd like to start a series of messages on knowing God and His will for our lives. I've entitled this message series *Knowing God's Will: Is It Like Using A GPS Or A Compass?* I admit I would love to have a global positioning system or a GPS when it comes to life and living. "In one mile, turn right... turn now... turn left in two miles... recalculating." We like it when the direction we should go in life is clear, concise, and without any confusion. We'd prefer if God would give us a precise step by step roadmap for today and tomorrow. But God's will, in my experience, is more like using a compass than a GPS. God points us in one direction. Don't expect Him to dictate every turn, every route, or every road along life's journey. Can we know anything about God's will? Sure, we can! Does God want us to know His will? Yes, He does. Consider our primary text for today. Notice some important assumptions in those verses. We can know God's will. We can understand God's will. But knowing His will is never automatic. There are things we can and must do in order to make knowing God's will easier and clearer.

So, we're going to think about God's will over seven messages, but we're definitely not going to have it all figured out even then. Leave room for some mystery. God's will is a bit like a puzzle we never complete this side of Heaven. I like what missionary and author, Elizabeth Elliott wrote, "Today is mine. Tomorrow is none of my business. If I peer anxiously into the fog of the future, I will strain my spiritual eyes so that I will not see clearly what is required of me now." We still have to live by faith in this life. We're still called to believe in a good and gracious God who's working out His plan and purpose for this world and for you and me, personally. Let's begin today by asking and trying to answer two key questions. Here's the first one:

WHAT IS GOD'S WILL?

It's important to know, first of all, that God's will is providential. What does that mean? What does God's will have to do with the capital of Rhode Island or a college that's had

some successful basketball teams? Providence means God has a plan that controls everything that happens in the universe. For the most part, this plan in all of its fullness and detail is incomprehensible to our limited minds. We simply can't grasp all of it. Nevertheless, we can know important parts of God's master plan. For example, the Bible tells us God decided before He even created this world He was going to send His Son, Jesus, into it. His plan also required Jesus to die and to be raised again from the dead thus paying the penalty for humanity's sins. That plan ensured that if you surrender spiritually to Jesus as Lord and Savior, you will receive the gift of eternal life. That plan also promises Jesus will return one day from Heaven in great power.

Here's a few dimensions of God's providential will it's good to remember. It's absolute. In other words, it's an expression of the One who's the supreme Ruler of the universe and who controls all things at all times. It's unchangeable. In other words, this will is going to be accomplished with or without your cooperation or mine. Then, it's unconditional. That means God thought up this master plan long ago and nothing is ever going to alter it. Also, God's will is good, just, and loving like God Himself. At times, it may look unfair, irrational, or contradictory to us. But that's only because our limited minds are trying to understand Someone who has an unlimited mind: the God of the universe. And He can only ever be good, just, and loving just like His will. It's impossible for Him to be or to act otherwise.

Dawson Trotman was a great man of God who founded The Navigators last century – a fine Christian ministry that still exists today. He was at a retreat at Schroon Lake in New York state. Two girls were thrown out of a speedboat during his time there and Trotman jumped in to save them from drowning. In the process, Dawson Trotman himself drowned. A friend who was with him ran down the shoreline of the lake and found Trotman's wife, Lila. "Lila, Dawson's gone," he screamed. "He's gone!" It's reported that Lila Trotman calmly quoted Psalm 115:3 (NLT) at that very moment, "Our God is in the heavens, and he does as he wishes." Pretty remarkable, yes? At that very moment, Lila Trotman reminded herself God's will is providential. What seemed to many as the premature, untimely death of a gifted leader was later seen as God's perfect plan for the fine ministry He founded and launched.

God's will is providential. But it's also permissive. It's wise to remember God has a perfect will and a permissive will. God doesn't cause sin, but He allows it. God doesn't cause evil, but He permits it. God doesn't cause suffering, but He doesn't always prevent it. If there's an aspect of God's will that falls into the mystery arena, this is it. How could God allow 6 million Jews to be murdered by the Nazis? Where was God when terrorists crashed hijacked planes into buildings on 9/11 causing the death of thousands? Why does God allow the suffering to continue in Ukraine? On a smaller scale, why does God allow a child to get cancer? Why do some people suffer terrible abuses of one kind or another? Why do people we deeply love die, and leave us well before their time? I can't adequately answer any of those questions. I don't know anyone who can. How evil and suffering fit into God's will remains a great mystery. All we can conclude is the fact God's will often permits evil and suffering while never diminishing God's goodness or changing His long term, master plan.

God's will is providential and it's permissive. It's also preceptive. Not perceptive, but preceptive. In other words, it involves precepts or principles, commands, and directives. There's much about God's will we don't know – even about our own lives. But there's a lot we can know precisely because it's made very clear to us in the Bible in the form of precepts. Sometimes these precepts are general principles that give us specific direction. For instance, the Bible makes it abundantly clear that sex is reserved for a marriage relationship between one man and one woman. Your specific situation in life doesn't alter or change that precept. God never says to you or me, "I know what my Word says, but my precept about sex doesn't really apply to you. You're an exception. Besides the culture you live in now has decided My views on sex are no longer relevant. Go ahead and have sex before marriage or outside of marriage with whomever you select." By the same token, the Bible also makes it clear that every follower of Jesus has the joyful privilege of sharing the good news about Jesus with people around us. God never says to you or me, "I want other Christians to be witnesses for Jesus, but not you. Nope, that precept doesn't apply to you. Don't bother praying for a lost person regularly and never utter one word about Jesus to anyone else ever."

There are some matters you never have to ask God about because He's already revealed His will about them in His Word. Now, true enough, God's precepts don't cover every situation or circumstance in life, but they cover a whole lot. Here's just a few examples of God's precepts: obey your parents, marry only a Christian, work at the occupation of your choice diligently, support your family, tithe your income to the Lord, give to the poor, never mistreat refugees or immigrants, raise your kids to know God's standards, study the Bible, pray, worship regularly and faithfully with other people who love God, look for opportunities to tell others about Jesus and what He's done for you, figure out your spiritual gifts and put them to use, be thankful, be joyful, don't allow resentment to take root in your heart, don't be prejudiced against other people, love your enemies. There's Bible verses for all of those precepts. They're God's will for every child of God. They're God's will for you no matter who you are, where you live, or what you're going through. There's nothing mysterious about them. You get acquainted with them when you read and study God's Word. The more you know the Bible, the less confusing it is to know God's will. Those who struggle least with God's will are those who know God's Word best. You really want to know God's will for your life? Show me how much of the Bible you read and meditate on regularly.

God's will is providential, permissive, and preceptive. It's also personal. It's good and right to seek God's will when you select a spouse, choose a career, buy a home, pick a church, or make many other major life decisions. Bible teachers differ on how detailed God's will might be for your life and mine. Most suggest God doesn't have an explicit will concerning everything you do – like what you decided to have for breakfast this morning or what outfit you chose to wear today. Others divide over how explicit God's will might be in really important matters like choosing a spouse or a career. But all agree God's will is definitely personal. The Bible tells us God put you together in your mother's womb and endowed you with all the spiritual, emotional, and physical qualities

you possess today. In fact, if you're a child of God today – a follower of Jesus – it's because God chose you to belong to Him long before He created the world.

Many of the Bible characters we read about were given a highly personal task or ministry. Some accepted God's personal will for them gladly and prospered as a result. David becoming king of Israel comes to mind. Others resisted God's personal will for them and brought a lot of misery upon themselves and others as a result. Do you remember the prophet Jonah and his reluctance to be a missionary to the lost people living in the city of Nineveh? Our text in Ephesians 5 today points to God's will in a personal sense. Paul, the author, wasn't referring to God's providential or permissive will here. Nor is he thinking of God's preceptive will. Instead, he was encouraging you and me to understand and discover God's personal will and live it out.

Some years ago a journalist wrote an article about the Florida citrus industry. He walked into a plant and saw a man sorting oranges. As the oranges came rolling down a conveyor belt, the worker sorted them according to size. Large oranges were sent through large holes, small oranges through small holes, and bruised oranges into a third set of holes. This reporter watched this worker perform his job and concluded it was incredibly boring. Finally, he asked him, "How can you stand putting these oranges into those holes all day long day after day?" The man shook his head and said, "You don't know the half of it. From the time I come into work until the time I go home, it's decisions, decisions, decisions!" We have seemingly unlimited choices for our occupation, where we live, whom we marry, and the type of church we'll attend. How do we discern God's will in all those decisions? It can be bewildering, to be sure. So, here's a second important question to ask and answer.

HOW CAN I KNOW GOD'S WILL?

Sometimes it's easier to understand what something is by understanding what it's not. First, then, knowing God's will is not a feeling. Yes, discerning God's will can indeed be a mystery. But it's a mistake to depend on impressions, emotions, or sensations to tell you God's will. You'll only invite trouble. Understanding God's will is not about finding a happy feeling or waiting for a quiver in your liver! Frankly, I get a little nervous around people who say a whole lot, "God told me to do this" or "I feel the Holy Spirit is directing me to do that." The problem with feelings is their reliability. There are as many sources for our emotions as there are emotions themselves. Illness affects your emotions. So does how much sleep you get. Medications. Your past experiences. What you eat or drink the night before. More dangerous than any of those is our sinful nature. It can affect our emotions profoundly. That's why the Bible says, "The human heart is the most deceitful of all things, and desperately wicked. Who really knows how bad it is?" (Jer 17:9 NLT) God's will is not a feeling and you will make some serious mistakes in determining His will for you life if you rely solely on your feelings, your emotions.

Second, knowing God's will is not a formula. You can develop a kind of checklist approach to discerning God's will. See what the Bible says. Check. Get godly counsel. Check. Consider your circumstances. Check. Take into your account your own

desires. Check. Pray about it. Check. Now, there's nothing wrong with anything on that checklist. In fact, those are all helpful and worthwhile things to consider when you're seeking God's will for a decision you need to make. The problem is assuming that once you've checked everything off your list – presto! – you now know God's will with absolute clarity. Oh, that life and living were that simple! Oh, that knowing God's will for every situation could be reduced to checking off the boxes on some list!

Determining God's will can't be reduced to a mechanical formula. Why not? A formula approach to discerning God's will ends up being inadequate. What if something on your checklist contradicts something else? What do you do if three criteria on your checklist say do this, but two criteria say do that? Do you only move forward if all five criteria agree? The Bible tells us to marry only a fellow Christian. But it will not tell you specifically if that woman is Mary or Alice or that man is Wayne or Ted. And then a formula approach leaves no room for God to overrule your mistakes. It assumes if you misread the checks – or the formula – then you've missed out on God's will for your life. Or you must then settle for God's second best, third best, or tenth best will. If that's true, every last one of us has forever missed the opportunity to know and do God's will. Why do I say that? Because each and every one of us has sinned, made poor decisions, lacked good judgment, and made bad choices, but here's what I know about God's will from God's Word. There's nothing in there about God's second, third, or tenth best will. But there is a whole lot in there about second, third, and multiples chances to get it right, discover, and do God's will. Don't reduce God's will to a formula.

Let's think about how to know God's will from a more positive angle. Third, knowing God's will is discovered through a friendship with God Himself. Knowing God's will is never about adhering to a bunch of rules, but instead entering into a relationship. Knowing God's will isn't discovered by mastering an agenda or working a formula, but maintaining a certain heart attitude towards God. Knowing God's will isn't following a step by step GPS-like route plan, but constantly checking an inner spiritual compass. Knowing God's will can't be reduced to a technique. It can only be discovered in the process of getting to know God personally. It's best to focus on God, not His guidance. When you focus on knowing God, the guidance will eventually come as a byproduct. The more you get to know God, the more you learn how to make decisions based on what you know would please Him in any given situation.

When you discover and maintain a healthy friendship with God, you're enabled to avoid some common attitudes that can really block discovering God's will. Like what? Like fatalism. "Whatever happens is God's will. Whatever will be, will be. Que sera, sera." Like what else? Like, fear. For example, we can fear change. And I guarantee God will still allow change to come into all of our lives. Or we can fear commitment. "What's God going to want me to do if I really give 100% of myself to Him?" Or we can fear criticism of other people. "Will so-and-so think I'm a fanatic if I bring up Jesus in a conversation?" Frustration is yet another attitude that can block discovering God's will. Every child of God gets frustrated with God eventually! Just don't allow yourself to get stuck in frustration that lasts for months or years. That's a dangerous place to stay for a long time. The Bible does say, "And we know that God causes everything to work

together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them.” (Rom 8:28 NLT) It does not say everything that happens to you is good. It says God causes everything to work together for our ultimate benefit. When you’ve developed a friendship with God, you believe that and hold on to it come what may.

Fourth, knowing God’s will demands faith. The Bible says, “It is impossible to please God without faith. Anyone who wants to come to him must believe that God exists and that he rewards those who sincerely seek him.” (Heb 11:6 NLT) Faith pleases God. He wants you to live by faith. If everything was always spelled out for us like a step-by-step GPS route plan, why would we need to have faith? Here’s a few conclusions for both discovering and then following God’s will. Each one is based on faith. First, you must be a Christian to know God’s will. When you commit your life to Jesus as Savior and Lord by faith, the Holy Spirit begins to reside in you spiritually. Among other benefits, He begins to reveal God’s will to you. If you really want to know God and His will, this is the first and most important step. And it requires faith to take it.

Here's another conclusion. You must be wise. Our text today reminded us of the importance of wisdom. “So be careful how you live. Don’t live like fools, but like those who are wise. Make the most of every opportunity in these evil days. Don’t act thoughtlessly, but understand what the Lord wants you to do.” (Eph 5:15-17 NLT) Wisdom involves taking stock of how you live every day. Wisdom means making the most of your time. Wisdom entails making the most of every opportunity that comes your way and using it to bring glory to God. Wisdom means putting good old fashioned common sense alongside faith and walking together hand in hand.

You must be a Christian. You must be wise. Another conclusion: You must want to do God’s will. Believe me, God will test you right there! The fact is there’s been times in my life when I didn’t really want to do God’s will. God’s will can be hard sometimes. It humbles my pride. It requires me to change. It makes me face my sin. It goes against my selfish desires. It makes me confront stuff in me I’d rather excuse and overlook. Really wanting to do God’s will is a heart thing. It’s all about wanting to please God above anything and everything else – above pleasing myself, other people, or staying comfortable and playing it safe. That requires faith. God loves and honors it. Here’s a final conclusion about discovering and doing God’s will. You must be willing to pray and wait. God’s will is not always easily or quickly discerned. At times it seems God just loves to make us wait. Instead, He wants our faith to grow. And praying and waiting is one of His favorite ways of developing godly patience or faith in each of us.

Whenever I’ve attended a circus or watched one on TV, I’ve always particularly enjoyed the trapeze artists. Did you know there’s a special relationship between the flyer and the catcher on a trapeze? The flyer is the person that lets go of the bar and the catcher is the one that catches him or her. As the flyer swings high above the crowd on that trapeze bar, the moment comes when he must let it go. He arcs out into the air. His job is to remain as still as possible and wait for the strong hands of the catcher to pluck him from the air. Did you know the flyer must never try to catch the catcher? Big mistake!

The flyer must wait in absolute trust. He must put all his faith in the catcher. Yes, the catcher will catch him, but the flyer must wait, have faith, and trust.

When it comes life and living and when it comes to knowing and doing God's will, guess who's the flyer? You and me. Guess who's the catcher? God and God alone. That's precisely why the Bible says, "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." (Pro 3:5-6 NLT)