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DISCERNING THE WILL OF GOD

Acts 21:1-14

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Acts Lesson 56

Discerning the Will of God Acts 21:1-14

All Christians want to know God's will for their lives. We want to know His will concerning major decisions, such as the career that we should pursue, the person that we should marry, and the place where we should live. We need His guidance on dozens of other daily decisions affecting our money, our time, and our relationships. If you know Christ as Savior and Lord, you want to please Him in every aspect of life by making wise decisions in line with His will.

Much of God's will is revealed in the commands and principles of His Word. You don't need to pray for guidance in these areas. In fact, you are sinning if you pray about whether you should marry a nice non-Christian (they're always nice!) God has already revealed His will on the matter, that you not be unequally yoked. You don't need to pray about whether to pursue a career as a drug dealer or thief. You don't need to pray about whether or not the person to whom you are already married is God's choice for your life partner. All of these and many other decisions are clearly spelled out in God's Word. We simply need to understand and obey the commands and principles that are revealed in His Word.

But what about the decision to marry girl A or girl B, when both girls love the Lord and they both would say yes to your proposal? (I never had that problem!) What about deciding your major in college? What about the decision to take job A in one city, or job B in another location? There are many such decisions where we need to know how to discern God's specific will.

Some depend heavily on subjective feelings or signs, to the point of falling into the ways of pagan divination (see Bruce Waltke, *Finding the Will of God* [Vision House]). For example, a girl was praying about where to go to college, when she came upon the Lord's words to Jacob, "Arise, go to Bethel." Since her denomination had a college of that name, she decided that God was telling her to go to Bethel College. I hope that once she got there she did not read Amos 4:4 which says, "Go to Bethel and sin!"

On the other side of the spectrum, and more seriously, Garry Friesen wrote *Decision Making and the Will of God* [Multnomah Press, 1980], in which he argues that God does not have a specific will for the details of each person's life. Rather, as long as a believer acts within the moral will of God and follows the principles of biblical wisdom, he is free to decide whatever he wants. Thus, if Sally and Jane are both dedicated single Christian women, Bob is free to marry whichever one he chooses, assuming that his pick goes along with the plan. Bob would be wasting his time to ask God to reveal His will, especially through some sign or inner impression. In effect, God would be in heaven shrugging His shoulders, saying, "They're both fine girls. Get wise counsel and do as you please."

Although Friesen levels some valid criticisms against what he calls the traditional view of finding God's will, I do not agree with his primary thesis. My main gripe is that if we don't need to seek God's guidance for our major (and some minor) decisions, then we really don't need to trust God in a practical, daily manner.

But, then, how do we discern God's will? The bad news (or good news, depending on how you look at it) is that there is no simple, mechanical formula in Scripture for discerning God's will in specific situations. If there were, we would probably just apply the formula without seeking God Himself. So the good news side of it is that God primarily guides us through our relationship with Him, as we grow to understand His Word and learn to walk daily by His Holy Spirit. But since even the best of us (including Paul) are fallen sinners, it is an imperfect and somewhat uncertain process at best. But even when we miss God's will due to our dim sight or sin, He is sovereign and gracious to overcome our mistakes.

The uncertainty of this process is revealed in the difference of opinion between godly scholars over whether Paul was right or wrong to go to Jerusalem. The Holy Spirit had repeatedly revealed to Paul that he would encounter "bonds and afflictions" if he went there (20:23). Some commentators, such as Donald Barnhouse, Ray Stedman, and James Boice, argue (in light of 21:4) that Paul was either deliberately sinning or making a foolish mistake to continue his journey in light of these warnings. Others (the majority of those that I read) argue that Paul was right and that those who pled with

him not to go were wrong. But our text and the history of Paul in Acts reveal some principles on how to discern God's will:

We should walk so closely with God that we discern His guidance as we live in obedience to His Word, in dependence on His Holy Spirit.

With that as a brief summary, I want to work through seven principles for discerning God's will, some of which are in our text, and others which come from Paul's walk with God.

1. To discern the will of God, you must write God a blank check with your life.

It is futile to speculate about God's will for your life unless you are 100 percent committed to obeying it. God isn't a travel agent who arranges your itinerary and then asks, "What do you think?" You say, "I like the week in Hawaii, but I'd prefer not to go to that Muslim country as a missionary. Could you change that to a few years in Tahiti, please?" He is the Lord, and it is true that He loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life! But you must yield your entire life to Him, trusting that His will for you is good, acceptable, and perfect (Rom. 12:1-2).

Paul had long since done that, so that he could now say, "I am ready not only to be bound, but even to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 21:13). He did not consider his own life of any account as dear to himself, in order that he might finish his course, and the ministry which he had received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God (20:24).

Signing your life over to God may strike you as a bit scary. What if do it and He tells me to go to some jungle as a missionary, when I don't even enjoy camping out? What if you don't like the cold, and He sends you to the Eskimos? But, remember, He is your *loving* Father and He is all-knowing and all-wise. His purpose is to be glorified through you by blessing your life. So you've got to begin by trusting Him.

Granted, His path for you may include some severe and difficult trials. But you can trust that even in these, He will bless you in ways that you cannot imagine if you will trust Him and submit to Him. His Word promises, "No good thing does He withhold from those who walk uprightly" (Ps. 84:11b). No one, including those

who have gone through severe trials or persecution, ever wrote God a blank check with his life and later regretted it. You must begin there if you want to discern His will.

2. To discern God's will, you must grow to know Him intimately through His Word and His Spirit.

Paul had known the Lord and walked closely with Him for years at this point. This fact, along with the fact that there is no hint in the text that Paul was being disobedient, leads me to disagree with those who say that Paul was sinning here. He may not have been wise (more on this in a moment). He may have been blinded to something that is obvious to us from our vantagepoint. (It's always easier to know God's will after the fact!) But Paul's aim for many years now had been to know Christ (Phil. 3:9-10). He knew God's Word well, and he walked by the Spirit, not by the flesh (Gal. 5:16). I think that as best as he knew how, Paul was seeking to obey the Lord by going to Jerusalem.

I have been married to Marla for almost 28 years now. On many matters I could tell you what she would want without asking her opinion. I know her will because I know her. In the same way, knowing God's will in a specific situation is very much bound up with knowing God Himself.

There are no shortcuts or easy formulas to knowing the Lord. It's a process that requires diligently seeking Him in His Word and in prayer over time. For some reason, God has designed life so that you have to make some of the biggest decisions (career, marriage partner) when you lack the maturity that you will gain later in life! That's one reason that you should seek the wise counsel of those who have followed the Lord for many years, perhaps including your parents! In the biblical culture, these decisions were pretty much made for you. If your father was a farmer, you became a farmer. Career choice wasn't much of an option. Your parents had a major role in choosing your marriage partner. It is only in recent times that young people have had pretty much free reign on these major life decisions! Wise and godly young people will seek wise and godly counsel.

If you are a relatively new believer, you should probably postpone a major life decision, such as marriage, until you get a basic

grounding in God's Word. You need to know the godly character qualities to look for in a mate. And, you need to be the kind of person that the kind of person you want to marry would want to marry. In other words, you won't win the heart of a godly young woman unless you are a godly young man.

3. To discern the will of God, you must act on biblical principles, not human wisdom.

I'm expanding here on the previous point in order to say that at times, God's wisdom and His ways are opposed to man's wisdom and ways (Isa. 55:8-9). Not usually, but occasionally, God wants us to do something that defies human logic. For example, using our text, human wisdom and logic would say that we should avoid a course of action that will lead us into obvious trials. But sometimes God's will is to be glorified through His servants as they endure various trials, or even through their martyrdom.

The biblical principle that was governing Paul's trip to Jerusalem was his strong conviction that in the church there is no Jew or Greek, slave or free, but we are all one in Christ (Gal. 3:28). He was taking the collection that he had raised from the Gentile churches to the Jewish church as a demonstration of love and unity. Luke hardly mentions this collection (24:17), but from Paul's epistles we know that it was a big deal to him (Rom. 15:25-32; 2 Cor. 8 & 9). James Boice speculates that Luke's silence about it may reflect that he did not think that it was a very good idea (*Acts* [Zondervan], p. 358). But the principle behind it, the unity of the church, is an important biblical doctrine (John 17). Paul was willing to march into the face of danger on the basis of his commitment to this truth.

Also driving Paul was his heart's desire for the salvation of the Jews. This was such a compelling force that Paul says that he would be willing to be cut off from Christ for eternity if it meant the salvation of the Jews (Rom. 9:3)! Because of this compelling desire to see the Jews saved, Paul was willing to sacrifice his life, if need be.

We need to live on the basis of biblical principles, not human wisdom. We've had several similar situations here as a church. A man got so upset because we sent out some college mission teams to dangerous parts of the world, that he and his family left the church. We listened to his counsel and we even adopted some of

his advised safety precautions. But as we sought to determine God's will, we felt that the Great Commission overrode his concerns. We sent the teams, recognizing the potential danger.

4. To discern the will of God, analyze your gifts, motives, and desires in light of God's sovereign purpose of being glorified among the nations.

It is possible to be committed to doing the Lord's will, but to be in the wrong place or position. For example, perhaps Paul could have sent some delegates with the collection, but stayed away himself, and still have accomplished his desire of unifying the church. A key question, which is not always easy to answer, is, "Where can I be the most effective in furthering God's kingdom in light of my gifts?" For example, I have a heart for missions, but I know that I am not an evangelist. I have asked myself, "Am I more effective to stay in America and instill in God's people a heart for missions or to go myself?" That is one reason I am near a university campus, because I want to see God raise up workers for the harvest in missions. If I ever feel that I can be more effective by going myself, I'm out of here!

Paul was admirable in his commitment to be willing to suffer and die for the name of Christ. But I can't help asking, should someone have asked him whether he would be more effective in prison or dead, or free to continue ministering as he was? It is not always God's will for us to be so committed that we ignore our own safety. On one occasion, David asked the Lord if the men from the town of Keilah would turn him over to King Saul, who sought his life (1 Samuel 23). When God said, "Yes, they will turn you over," David took off, and rightly so. It's a tough question to ask up front, because sometimes God can use us more while we are in prison or through martyrdom than if we spared our lives.

In addition to our gifts and how we can best be used, we need to examine our motives and desires. Am I truly seeking God's glory and not my own? Is my heart open before Him, with no secret sins? If I can honestly answer yes, then I should ask, "What are my desires? What do I enjoy doing?" If I am delighting in the Lord, then I can trust Him to give me the desires of my heart, either by fulfilling my current desires, or by changing those desires to be in line with His purpose (Ps. 37:4). He is a loving Father who delights

in blessing His children by granting their holy desires. So if I am delighting in God, it is legitimate in seeking His will to ask, "What do I enjoy doing?" That may be where I should serve Him.

5. To discern the will of God, you must listen to and evaluate the counsel of godly believers.

Our text says that "through the Spirit" these believers told Paul not to set foot in Jerusalem (21:4). Those who think that Paul made a mistake or sinned argue that he disobeyed the directly commanded will of God. But most commentators say that "through the Spirit" means "that the Spirit's message was the occasion for the believers' concern rather than that their trying to dissuade Paul was directly inspired by the Spirit." So they see it not as Paul's rejecting God's command, but rather as God's revealing what would happen, with Paul's friends' natural desire to dissuade him (Richard Longenecker, *Expositor's Bible Commentary* [Zondervan] 9:516).

After Agabus' prophecy, even Luke and Paul's other traveling companions ("we," 21:12) joined in with the locals in trying to persuade Paul not to go to Jerusalem, and Paul's response shows that they were getting to him. But he was so strongly persuaded that God wanted him to go to Jerusalem that he resisted their appeals.

Which side was right? Frankly, it's difficult to say. Paul may have been a bit strong-headed in not listening to their counsel. He didn't need to go to Jerusalem to prove that he was willing to suffer and die for the Lord. If he had not gone, perhaps God would have used him even more powerfully than He did. On the other hand, Paul's resolve to stand alone, even against a group of godly men who were unified in pleading with him not to go, may show how firmly he believed that he was in the will of God. Several commentators point out numerous parallels between Jesus' firm resolve to go up to Jerusalem to the cross and Paul's resolve here. So it is difficult to decide which side was right. But the point is, we must evaluate the counsel that we receive, even if it comes from a unified group of godly friends.

Thus to discern God's will, you must write God a blank check with your life; you must know Him intimately through His Word and His Spirit; you must act on biblical principles, not human wis-

dom; you must analyze your gifts, motives, and desires in light of God's purpose for His glory; and, you must listen to and evaluate godly counsel.

6. To discern God's will, you must prayerfully evaluate the circumstances that God providentially brings into your life.

Again, this is not an easy thing to do! For example, God had now brought into Paul's life repeated warnings against going to Jerusalem from many different sources. Should he have taken these warnings as God saying, "Don't go?" Or, could they be to test his obedience to what he knew to be God's will? Perhaps the warnings were for the purpose of helping both the saints and Paul to stand firm after he was imprisoned, knowing it to be God's will in advance. Perhaps Paul's other circumstances, such as being able to get on ships that got him to Jerusalem in time for Pentecost, showed God's approval on his going there.

As you can see, the same set of circumstances can be interpreted in a number of ways, and so we need to be careful in how we evaluate them. It is generally not wise to "put out fleeces" to try to determine God's will. Sometimes closed doors do not mean "no," and sometimes open doors do not mean "yes." Finally,

7. After prayerfully following all of the above, in dependence on God, you must follow your own sound judgment, conscience, and convictions, submitting to the consequences.

Ultimately, each person must determine God's will for himself or herself. You can't blame others for the decisions that you make. In a marriage, the husband is accountable to God for family decisions, but any wise husband will only go against a godly wife's counsel after much deliberation and prayer. If Paul was right here, and his friends were wrong, it illustrates the point that sometimes bad counsel stems from loving motives. It was because these people loved Paul that they pled with him not to go, but he had to go against the wishes of his friends to do what he thought God wanted him to do.

Sometimes your parents may counsel you not to go to the mission field because they are genuinely concerned for your safety. That counsel could be from the Lord, but it might not be from the

Lord. The will of God is not necessarily the most trouble-free route. You must work through the process in dependence on the Lord and then lovingly tell family and friends, "I'm doing what I believe God wants me to do. Please pray for me" (Rom. 15:30-31).

Conclusion

What if you make a mistake in discerning the will of God? If you come to realize that your mistake was due to stubbornness, self-will, or pride, confess it and ask God to overrule your mistake. I do not think that Paul sinned by going to Jerusalem, but I'm not sure whether or not he made the wisest decision. But God used Paul's prison years for His glory, and He can use our mistakes and even our rebellion if we submit to Him and seek to please Him.

Remember, the process begins when you trust Christ as Savior and when you write Him that blank check with your life, being willing to do whatever He calls you to do. If you've never repented of your sins and trusted in Christ, you are clearly out of the will of God, because He is not willing that any should perish, but desires for all to come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9).

Discussion Questions

1. Is feeling a peace (or lack thereof) about something a valid factor in determining God's will? (See 2 Cor. 2:12-14.)
2. Do we need to seek God's will for relatively minor decisions (what we wear for the day, etc.)? Why/why not?
3. How can we know when to go against the counsel of godly people? What principles apply?
4. Why is putting out a fleece (or asking for a sign) not a good practice when seeking God's will?

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