

DISCERNING GOD'S WILL

SERVANT LEADERS



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INTRODUCTION:

Do you desire to live in God's Will? If you are taking this course, there is a good chance you answered yes. Have you ever struggled to know what God's will was? The topic of finding God's will is one of the most perplexing issues in modern-day theology.

In his book, *Just Do Something*, Kevin DeYoung states the following:

"In the usual understanding of God's will...[God] has the perfect plan for our lives. And He'll hold us accountable if we don't follow His will. But He won't show us what that will is... So we obsess over God's will of direction, eventually getting frustrated with God for not showing us what He wants."

The Tension:

Perhaps you have heard or asked the following question yourself:

"If I mess up early on, does that mean I've screwed up my chances for ever being in God's will?"

You see, sometimes, all we want is for God's Word to be our Magic 8-Ball. We seek God's ANSWERS only when we have questions.

There exists a tension: We want to live according to God's will, but we struggle to know what His will is. But there is good news!

For God is not the author of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints. 1 Corinthians 14:33

God is not the author of all the CONFUSION surrounding His will. In fact, He loves to reveal secret things! Consider what Daniel said about God when the king asked him to tell him his dream before he interpreted it.

27 Daniel answered in the presence of the king, and said, "The secret which the king has demanded, the wise men, the astrologers, the magicians, and the soothsayers cannot declare to the king. 28 But there is a God in heaven who reveals secrets..." Daniel 2:27-28a

God is not a SNEAKY God who likes to hide His plan from His followers, and then punish them for taking a wrong turn. No, God loves to reveal.

So, where do we go so wrong?



I. THE PROBLEM WITH TRADITIONAL METHODS

A. What are the Traditional Methods for Finding God's Will?

1. We look for a SIGN.

The rational is, if God wants to reveal something to me, He'll do it! Since He is all-powerful, He'll probably do it in some miraculous way! After all, Didn't He give Hezekiah a sign to show that He meant business when He promised him to extend his life? (See 2 Kings 20:8-11.)

Yes, God revealed His will miraculously... but does that mean it should be the normative method for finding God's will? Maybe God didn't reveal His will every time because He is also in the business of building FAITH. If God revealed His will miraculously every time, we would never GROW in our faith.

2. We lay out a FLEECE.

The fleece method is a variation of the sign method. The terminology of the fleece comes from the narrative of Gideon. (Read Judges 6:36-40.)

Some have used this passage to develop a method for determining God's will (even though that is clearly not the point of the passage.) The idea is that we TEST God. We say something like, "Ok, God. If it's your will for me to do "X" then make sure that "Y" happens as a sign.

The difference between a fleece and a sign is the issue of CONTROL. With a sign, God is at least in control of the sign. With a fleece, we can make demands of God that He craft his signs to fit our standard of proof.

3. We twist SCRIPTURE.

The twisted scripture method is also a variation of the sign method. In this method, the individual goes to Scripture, but instead of looking for the objective meaning of the text, he or she will look for hidden messages within the text. We will discuss this more in the next section.

4. We trust our GUT.

Offentimes, we simply trust our gut. By that, I mean that we simply follow our instincts or impressions.

B. The Problem with Looking for a Sign

1. It is true that sometimes God gives OBVIOUS signs to reveal His will.

There are several biblical examples. (See Exodus 3:12, 1 Kings 13:3, Numbers 14:11-12, and Luke 2:12.)

2. These signs were given at GOD'S DISCRETION.

Whether God gives a sign simply because we are still weak in our faith, or because His will in an instance might be rather complicated, God is always in control of when, where, and with whom He will do so.



3. When people asked for a sign, Jesus always pointed them back to SCRIPTURE.

38 Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered, saying, "Teacher, we want to see a sign from You." 39 But He answered and said to them, "An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. Matthew 12:38-39

Why so strong a statement? What's so wrong with looking for a sign?

Even though God may choose to reveal His will through a sign of some sort, looking for a sign is not healthy for several reasons. If we look for signs...

1. We will never have our faith STRETCHED.

God is in the business of building our faith. Consider how obvious He made His presence to the Israelites early on, compared to how He related to them once they entered the Promised Land.

2. We will IGNORE the biblical methods for discerning God's will.

If God consistently revealed His will through signs, we would never need to read God's Word or rely on the Holy Spirit (or pray for that matter.) Christian living would be pure religion and no relationship!

3. We might interpret NATURAL occurrences as signs.

There is a danger in looking for a sign in that you can interpret almost anything as a sign, if you want one bad enough.

I had a friend once that liked a girl from Lincoln Park, MI. He wondered if it was God's will for him to pursue this relationship, so he asked God for a sign. Later on that day, we went to the local supermarket where we ran into Mrs. Lincoln, who had just parked her car. That was all it took. (And the relationship never worked out.)

When someone presses forward with an endeavor, thinking it is God's will, he can get himself into a mess of trouble!

C. The Problem with Laying Out a Fleece

Truthfully, all of the problems with the sign method would also apply to the fleece method as the twisted Scripture method. Here is the specific problem with using the Gideon narrative as the normative model for finding God's will.

1. The Gideon narrative is about the GROWTH of Gideon's faith.

2. The story of the fleece is from the BEGINNING of the story when Gideon's faith was weak.

3. The point of the story was to show how weak in faith Gideon was.

4. It was never intended to be a PRESCRIBED method for discovering God's will.



D. The Problem with Twisting Scripture

Let's spend a little more time here, since this is such a prevalent method by Christians today.

Using the twisted Scripture method of interpreting the Bible is called, "Rhema Theology." It is based on a misunderstanding of the Greek word *rhema* in the New Testament. It is one of two words often translated as "word." *Logos* means word in the sense of message. For example, "I sent word (*logos*) to my friends that I would be late." *Rhema* simply means word in the grammatical sense. "This sentence is six words (*rhema*) long."

In regards to Scripture, some theologians have taught that *logos* is God's word for the Bible, and *rhema* is a special word from God, using the Bible but with an alternate and specific interpretation. This is outright false.

1. Definition of Rhema Theology

An approach to the Bible that believes God presently reveals individual and PERSONAL interpretations of the Bible to the reader today, and that these private interpretations are biblically authoritative even though they are completely unconnected from the original CONTEXT of the passage.

Examples: What could be the subjective interpretations of the following?

- a. Jeremiah 34:4-5a - For the person going into battle...
- b. John 11:4 - For the person fighting with cancer...

2. 4 Problems with Subjective Interpretation

- a. It is FORBIDDEN in Scripture. (2 Peter 1:20-21)
- b. The Bible interpretation becomes subject to US, instead of us being subject to it.
- c. The ORIGINAL interpretation gets ignored.
- d. We trust in promises that were never INTENDED for us.

If God does not follow through in the way we IMAGINE (or desire), then we lose CONFIDENCE in Him.

E. The Problem with Trusting our Gut

- 1. Sometimes, we just get a FEELING or an impression that one path is better than another.
- 2. There is no way of KNOWING whether this is coming from God, or from some other subconscious desire.
- 3. There is nothing wrong with trusting your gut as long as it is telling you to do something you know is good.



4. The problem with trusting your gut comes when we give it the full weight of AUTHORITY.

"So the problem with impressions is not that they are subjective... [It's] in assuming they come from the Lord... If a thought or impulse pops into your head, even if it happens while you are reading Scripture, don't assume it is a voice from heaven." (pg. 84)

But what about the Holy Spirit's guidance of Paul in the book of Acts?

1. The book of Acts gives numerous examples of visions, audible voices, and promptings of the Holy Spirit.

2. These extraordinary means of guidance were NEVER sought out.

3. The normative method of the apostles was to use WISDOM and good judgment.

"I don't deny that God can still speak to us in direct, surprising ways. Of course, it must always be tested against Scripture, but I believe God can still give visions. The point is that these extraordinary means in the New Testament are just that - extra-ordinary." (pg. 84)

II. 3 Types of God's Will

To talk intelligently and biblically about God's will, we must define the terms. There are three connotations when we talk about God's will, outlined by Kevin DeYoung in his book, *Just Do Something*.

A. God's will of DECREE

This refers to God's overarching PLAN, from before the creation of the world and into eternity future. It includes everything that has happened, or will happen.

In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will. Ephesians 1:11

Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your books were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there were none of them. Psalm 139:16

B. God's Will of DESIRE

This refers to what God desires that we DO.

3 It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; 4 that each of you should learn to control your own body in a way that is holy and honorable, 5 not in passionate lust like the pagans, who do not know God; 6 and that in this matter no one should wrong or take advantage of a brother or sister. The Lord will punish all those who commit such sins, as we told you and warned you before. 1 Thessalonians 4:3-6



The So-called Contradiction

Wait, isn't that a contradiction? How can God desire for us to do His will, if He has an eternal plan? How can God plan out the details of His decree, yet allow men to make choices?

It would seem, at first glance, that the sovereignty of God and human responsibility (or volition) are at opposite ends of the spectrum... that they couldn't possibly co-exist. (See below.)

Sovereignty of God

Human Responsibility

Instead of seeing them as contradictions, it is best to see them as 2 sides of the same coin. It's hard to see one side when you're looking at the other, but they are both parts of the same coin.

So we should not define God's sovereignty in such a way as to eliminate HUMAN choice and responsibility.

3 The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. 2 Peter 3:9

But we also should not stress human responsibility in such a way as to DEVALUE God's sovereignty.

25 "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Matthew 6:25-30

26 Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? 27 Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life? 28 "And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. 29 Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. 30 If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Matthew 6:25-30

C. God's Will of DIRECTION.

This refers to the day-to-day will of God in which we seek to live. This is where 90% or more of the tension lies. We know God is in control (Will of Decree). We oftentimes realize that a path is sinful (Will of Desire), but we struggle to know what path God wants me to take today!

"One way to look at it is like this: God's will of desire is the struggle between right and WRONG, but God's will of direction is the struggle between right and LEFT." - Dave Graef

The question now is, how does God reveal His will in these three areas?



III. How Does God Reveal His Will?

A. God's Role & Ours: How God reveals His will, and what our role should be.

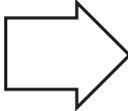
1. Will of Decree

How God reveals His will...		Our Role...
He UNRAVELS it over time.		TRUST

How did Joseph know that God's will of decree was for him to save the known world from famine?

How did Ruth know that God's plan was for her to meet her kinsman redeemer?

2. Will of Desire

How God reveals His will...		Our Role...
He reveals it in SCRIPTURE.		OBEY

How did Joseph obey God's will of desire?

How did Ruth obey God's will of desire?



3. Will of Direction

How God reveals His will...		Our Role...
He gives us some TOOLS.		USE THE TOOLS.

B. Tools of the Trade

1. SCRIPTURE

1 I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. 2 And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. Romans 12:1-2

If you want to know what God's will is, you have to get to know the Scriptures!

2. WISE COUNSEL

...let the wise listen and add to their learning, and let the discerning get guidance. Proverbs 1:5

The way of fools seems right to them, but the wise listen to advice. Proverbs 12:15

Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed. The way of fools seems right to them, but the wise listen to advice. Proverbs 15:22

Listen to advice and accept discipline, and at the end you will be counted among the wise. Proverbs 19:20

3. PRAYER

- a. Not for a SIGN.
- b. For PURE motives.
- c. For TEACHABILITY.
- d. For WILLINGNESS to obey.
- e. For God's KINGDOM to advance.



IV. How Do We Discover

31 So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' 32 For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. 33 But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. 34 Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

Matthew 12:31-34

1. We seek first that which would ADVANCE the Kingdom. (God's will of Decree)
2. We OBEY what the Scriptures tell us. (God's will of Desire)
3. We DISCOVER God's will. (God's will of Direction)

