

### ***“Discovering God’s Will—The Adventure Begins”***

Today as we start a new year, we start a series on discovering God’s will for our lives. I think we’d probably agree that the lives we are living right now are for the most part a result of the decisions that we’ve made. Decisions about family; about who we marry; decisions about having kids, how many kids, where to work, should we move, should we take that job in Kansas City, should we stay here, should we move away from our family, should we move in with our family, how long should we stay? Should I accept that invitation, should I move in with her, should I move out? Should I save money here or spend it there?

Basically as you look back over your life, who you are, and where you are today is a result of the decisions you’ve made. Yes, we might like to blame our parents for where we are in life, “If only I hadn’t been born in that kind of home, if only it hadn’t been so dysfunctional, I wouldn’t be struggling with what I struggle with today. If only my dad hadn’t...If only my mom would have...” We can go on and on. But the truth is, right now, we’re the ones who make the decisions, we’re the ones who are taking the hand we’re dealt and have made decisions based on that. Consequently, where we are today is based on the decisions that we’ve made.

Some of us might say, “Hey, I’m living my dream, I’m right where I wanted to be.” But the truth is that most of us are not where we thought we’d be when we were 25, or 35, or 55, or 65. There have been some good things and some bad things but we’ve fallen short of what we aspired to, and oftentimes the reason is because of the decisions that we’ve made.

Many of you’ve come to this church and you’re thinking, “I’ve blown it so bad over the years and I just hope that there is a God out there that can keep me from making any more dumb decisions. I want to make good decisions and if there is any chance that in this book, the Bible, or through God or his people, if somehow I can get some guardrails up in my life so I don’t continue to veer off course, that’s why I’m here.”

Here is some good news: Your heavenly father is exactly that. He’s a heavenly father. And like any good father he wants to guide, and wants to direct, our lives. For lots of us, that’s why we come Sunday after Sunday. But there’s always the challenge of, “How do I know if it’s God nudging me, and how do I know if it’s something I ate the night before? Or my inner babbler, just babbling?”

It’s like the guy who decided one day to go ice fishing. He gets all his equipment together and makes his way out onto the ice. He gets all set up and starts cutting a hole in the ice and suddenly a voice booms from the heavens, “THERE ARE NO FISH UNDER THE ICE!” The guy moved further down the ice and started to cut another hole. Again, the voice bellowed, “THERE ARE NO FISH UNDER THE ICE!” The guy was not going to give up and moved way down to the opposite end of the ice and tried again to cut a hole. The voice came once more: “THERE ARE NO FISH UNDER THE ICE!” The guy stopped, looked skyward, and said, “Is that you, Lord?” The voice replied, “No, I’m the manager of this ice-rink!”

How can we know for sure that we’re hearing from God? And it gets more confusing because you hear from Christians who give you contrary advice. One Christian friend says, “I heard from God about your marriage and you need to leave him.” Another Christian friend says, “I heard from God about your marriage and you need to stay with him through this rough time.” How in the world do we know what God wants us to do?!

But again, the good news is that God wants to give you and me direction. But don’t let that scare you. Especially if you’re a brand new Christian and all this hearing from God stuff sounds a little wacky. Or you’re just kind of exploring Christianity and hearing from God sounds like Twilight Zone stuff. Listen, we’re not talking about the audible voice of God. I don’t think I’ve ever heard the audible voice of God. In a way that might be pretty cool, but it could also scare the bejeebers out of you. So we’re not talking about audible voices here. But we’re talking about a God who wants us to call him Father who cares about your life, and cares about my life, and cares about the decisions we make because he knows we are where we are today, primarily because of our good and bad decisions. So God loves us and wants to give us direction in our lives, but how do we recognize his direction?

Let’s take a look at verse that’s got a huge promise in it. We’ll look at the end first then come back to the beginning. It says in Proverbs 3:6, **“He will make your paths straight” (Proverbs 3:6)**. That means that

God will make your paths obvious. He will make it clear to you what you're to do, where you're to go, what you're to become. This is a promise that God has made to everybody who wants to get in on knowing what it is he wants you to do with your life.

Now, when we talk about the will of God there are few foundational things we need to understand about the will of God. The Bible uses the phrase "the will of God" in three ways. It's important that we get this because it helps everything else make sense.

The Bible talks about **the providential will of God, the moral will of God and the personal will of God.**

**The providential will of God** has to do with the things that God is going to do no matter what. There are some things that God is going to do just because he's God and he's just going to do them. The providential will of God is the stuff you don't have to pray for God to do. For instance in Galatians 4:4-5 it says that when God was ready he sent Jesus into the world as the Messiah. Now, God was going to send Jesus into the world no matter what. It didn't matter if anybody prayed for that or not, it was going to happen.

Now even though God's going to do these things anyway, it's important we're aware of this because all through history God has used men and women to accomplish his providential will. One day an angel showed up to Mary and said, "Mary, you're going to have a child." God's like, "I'm sending my son into the world and nobody's going to stop me. But Mary I'm going to need you." One day God said to Abraham, "Abe I need you to get up, pack up and head to a place you've never been. I'm going to start a nation through you and all the world will be blessed through you. Nobody can stop me from doing this, but I've chosen to work through you." So God's providential will is the stuff he's going to do anyway and typically he does this through people. As believers, the more familiar we become with what God is up to now, and what God plans to do, no matter what, the easier it becomes for us to identify his will for our lives.

Another way the Bible talks about the will of God relates to **the moral will of God.** The moral will of God has to do with those things that God has given all of us as commands. We're talking about the thou shalt and thou shalt not's. There are certain things you don't really have to pray about. "Lord, should I lie? Guide me here, Lord." No. God's already made it pretty clear, you don't lie. "God should I treat my employees fairly and with dignity?" You don't need to pray that prayer. God's already answered that.

1 Thessalonians 4:3 says, "**It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality**" (1Thessalonians 4:3, NIV). Part of God's will for your life and mine is that we strive to be morally pure. You don't really have to pray about it. Your boyfriend calls up and says, "We could save a lot of money, we can try this thing out, you wouldn't buy a pair of shoes without trying them on first, you wouldn't buy a car without driving it first, so let's move in together and try this out." You don't need to get on your knees and ask God, "I need direction for this in my life, do you want me to move in with my boyfriend?" God's already answered that question.

1 Peter 2:13-14 talks about obeying the government. Most of us broke that on the way the church this morning by about 10 miles per hour, so we could get here and hear from God! The scripture is clear that we're to obey the authority of the government. That means when April 15 is coming and you're finishing up your taxes and they'll never know, and I've got to start that college fund, they'll never find out. "Oh God please show me should I withhold from the government..." Listen, you don't even need to pray the prayer. God has already answered that for you. So all throughout scripture we find the moral will of God. It's the basic do's and don'ts of the scripture.

This is very, very important because the more familiar we become with the moral will of God, the easier it is for us to discern the third part, which is what we're most interested in anyway. It's **the personal will of God.** The personal will of God comes into play when we're asking personal questions like, "Should I marry her or should I not?" The personal will of God is asking, "God should I buy this car, or this truck? Should I take the job or not?" It's those personal decisions that all of us need to make. And the good news is that God is very interested in those kinds of decisions

Now if you don't get anything else for the next four weeks, here's the big picture. The more familiar you become with the providential will of God (what God is going to do anyway); and the more obedient you become to the moral will of God (what God wants us all to do); the easier it will be for you to discover the personal will of God. "Do I go into this partnership, should I work on my own, stay where I am, move back home?" All those kinds of decisions fall into the category of the personal will of God.

Now, how many of you know what this is? It's a plumb line. The weight on the end is the plumb bob. Do you know what this is called. Yes, the string smartalec. It's called a plumb line. Builders use this, or a laser version of it today, but they use something like this to determine what everything else around it will do. Everything is built in relationship to the plumb line. When masons are laying brick they use something like a plumb line. They make sure things are plumb horizontally and vertically.

Here's what I'm getting at. God's providential will and God's moral will determine everything else that God's going to call you to do, ask you to do. It's the standard by which all others decisions should be made. So the more familiar you are with this, the easier it is for you to discern direction in the unfamiliar things. The more familiar you become with the providential will of God, and the more surrendered you become to the moral will of God, the easier it will be for you to determine, to discern, God's personal will for you.

Several years ago a friend took me out to lunch and I could tell something was up. And something was definitely up. He told me that he had fallen in love with a woman and she had fallen in love with him and they were getting serious. He kind of wanted my blessing. I asked him about everything and was excited for him. They had all kinds of things in common, and strong faith lives, and shared hobbies, and it was all great! But then he mentioned that she was still "technically" married. She was in the middle of an ugly divorce and it wasn't finalized yet, but any time now and it would be over. So he's asking me for my blessing.

That's actually happened to me a number of times, people, in one way or another, asking me to bless that very situation.

But I couldn't do that. God's moral will is pretty clear here. I told my friend, "If she's going through a divorce, she's got to finish that process before you guys start dating. God's moral will is there, not to keep you from having fun, but to protect you, to be that guard rail so you don't have trouble." I told him, "Just mutually agree to keep your distance. Let her finish what she has to finish, and then if it's meant to be, you guys can start from there, but don't pretend like it's God's will for you to be together now, because it isn't." I told him, "Your presence in the midst of that situation is going to make it worse for everybody, not better."

Honestly, I can't remember a time when anybody has taken that advice. And every time it ends up producing some of the most painful stuff you can imagine. It sure did for my friend. I'm not a prophet, I'm no wise sage, but there is some clarity about things like this from God's moral will. And if we know it, and live, it can protect us from a great deal of pain.

It's very difficult to discover God's personal will for your life if you're not in tune with his moral will.

Take a look at the other part of the verse we started with. Proverbs 3:5-6. "**Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight**" (Proverbs 3:5-6, NIV). Look at that closely. Trust in the Lord with how much of your heart? There's part of the problem. The problem is not God's willingness to communicate with us. He loves us, he wants the best for us, he wants to share his will with us. The problem is our unwillingness to follow through. You see, there's a tendency on our part to say, "God, I want you to show me what you want me to do, so I can consider it." "God, I'm really, really, interested in what you have to say, so I can put that in my basket of options and I'll consider it."

But that's not trusting God with all our heart. That's leaning on your own understanding—your own ability to sort things out, and manage things, and manipulate things.

Then in verse 6 it says it again, "In ALL your ways acknowledge him." Not just in the ways that deal with your specific circumstance. Not just what you're praying about right now, but in all your ways acknowledge him.

In other words, if you're at the place in your life where you're saying, "God, I'm not sure I want to do your will, but I want to know what it is." God, who created you and loves you says, "I'm sorry but I just don't play that way. But if you'll trust in me with all your heart, if in all the other areas of your life that you do know about, you acknowledge me, then I promise I will make your path plain, clear, obvious, you won't miss it."

You see, it's surrender to the known will of God that paves the way to discovering the unknown will of God. It's surrender and obedience to what we do know that sets us up to be able to discern what we don't know.

So here's what we have so far: God loves you and me. He knows our lives are a direct result of the decisions we make. Like a good father, God wants to help us make good decisions. He's made his moral will known to us. We start there and then being to know his personal will for us.

But I want us to get crystal clear about something else. Listen carefully. God is more interested in you discovering him than he's interested in you discovering his will. The ultimate thing for God isn't the information—should it be black or white, is it Joplin, or Kansas City, this job or that one. Those are important, but the ultimate thing for God is that in the process of discovering his will, he wants you to discover him. In the process of trying to know God's will, the truth is, you get to know him. And ultimately, that's what God's after.

I think God leverages that process so that when it's all said and done, our faith grows, and when our faith intersects with God's faithfulness we fall on our knees, either literally or figuratively and say, "Wow! What a great God, what a great God." That's what he's ultimately after.

Philip Yancey writes, "**I do not get to know God and then do his will. I get to know him more deeply by doing his will.**" **Philip Yancey.** It's in the process of seeking God's will that God opens himself up to us in ways that we never would have anticipated. And at the end of the process, we haven't simply made a decision about whether go here, or do that, or take that job, or quit this one, it's more than just a decision. At the end of the process we know our creator and our faith has increased. At the end of the process, it's not just that something happened out there were the decision was being made. Something happened in here because as I sought to know God's will, I found that I got to know God.

Over the next three weeks we're going to be equipped to know God's will and live it out so that 2010 can be the best year ever. A year where we avoid the avoidable pain. A year where we don't miss a single opportunity. A year where we make the best decisions possible because we're tuned in to the will of our heavenly Father who loves us. 2010 can be the best year ever. And for today that's the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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