

“Discovering God’s Will—Checking the Compass”

We started this New Year with a series called Discovering God’s Will. The whole idea behind this is that 2010 can be the best year yet. It really can be the best year yet especially if we can tune in to God’s will for our lives. And the Good News is that God wants us to know his will; his will is for us to have lives that have direction, and purpose, and joy and lots of other good things. God wants us to make good decisions and he’s given us ways to know his will so that we can do just that. Because, as we all know, the lives we live are the direct result of the decisions we make.

Now we started this series looking at the ways we encounter God’s will. His providential will (which is what God is going to do anyway), God’s moral will (which is what he wants all of us to do), and God’s personal will (God’s will for the individual circumstances of my life). God’s providential will and God’s moral will are like guardrails that protect us, our job is to stay between them.

It’s real important for us to remember that the whole idea behind discovering God’s will is ultimately discovering God, knowing God, loving God and being loved by God.

Last week Mark talked about the fast track in discovering God’s will by seeking the counsel of other people—seeking wisdom, and not just approval. Asking for help and not just barreling full speed ahead on our own.

That brings us to today. Because **another way that God wants to direct us personally is through his word.** The Bible. If you know me, if you’ve been around here for a while, you know that I try to be in the Bible every day and I want you to be in it every day. It’s a great way to discover God’s providential will, God’s moral will, and God’s personal will. I’m a man of this book, but here’s the deal. The Bible gets so misused that it gets overlooked as a primary tool for discovering God’s will.

In fact, every cult you’ve ever heard of used the Bible to proclaim God’s will. You remember David Koresh and the Branch Davidians and the horrible tragedy there in Waco. Koresh was incredibly knowledgeable about the Bible and through that whole disaster he led people using scripture. They were saying, “It has to be from God, it’s coming right from scripture.” The Bible has been so misused and abused that lots of people just disregard it as a source of knowing God’s personal will. But it is a primary, if not the primary means, through which God wants to lead us and direct us—but we need to know how.

So that’s really what I want to narrow in on today by asking the question: **“How does God speak to us through scripture and how can we use the Bible to discern God’s will for our lives?”**

How do you do that with integrity and not just in a way where you look for confirmation for what you already want to do?

As a starting place let’s address and own a difficult truth. Take a look at this passage from the book of Isaiah. This is God talking, **“For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, declares the LORD. ‘As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts’” (Isaiah 55:8, NIV).**

That’s not new news. God’s saying, “We don’t think alike, and my ways are different from your ways. The way you respond to circumstances is not how I would. The way you handle yourself with finances and family is probably not how I would do it. What comes natural to you, what seems very logical to you, is not necessarily my way.”

The implication is that in making decisions what comes natural to us may actually lead us over the edge. The situations where we’re using our logic and power of reason, sometimes from God’s perspective might be illogical and unreasonable!

Like when we’re making relationship decisions and our hearts are leaning us in a direction, it could be that’s not a direction God would have us lean at all. That we can’t necessarily trust our hearts. We can’t even necessarily trust our ability to reason. And we certainly can’t trust our intuition when it comes to discovering God’s will. God’s ways are not our ways, and God’s thoughts are not our thoughts. But we can change that. We can get God to think like us... NO. No. We can actually become better at thinking like God.

You see in the scriptures, what God has given us is a slice of his thinking. In the scriptures God has given us a piece of his mind. God’s given us his word and essentially said, “I want to expand your perspective.

I want to move you beyond where you are emotionally so that your perspective is what it needs to be in order to make the right decision.”

God has invited us to look into his thoughts and look into his ways and become so familiar with his thoughts and his ways that over time his thoughts become our thoughts, and his ways become our ways. And in doing so we learn to discern and sort out God's will for our lives.

Remember growing up, how you figured your parents out. A friend says, “Ask your mom if you can come over and do this.” You say, “Nah.” “Why don't you at least ask?” “Because I know what she'll say.” “How do you know?” “I've been around her long enough to know.”

Or you say, “My dad is just going to kill me when he finds out.” “How do you know?” “I just know!” “You don't know what he's going to do.” “Oh, I do know!”

By the time you were a teenager, you knew your parents and you could pretty much discern their will, their decisions, in a lot of different environments because you knew them. And now as parents we forget that our kids are sitting in their rooms doing the same thing—figuring us out!

The same thing is true of your spouse right? Wives, you've figured out what's on your husbands' minds. It didn't take much! And husbands, you know what's on your wife's mind...well, ok, not so much. Actually, last week I was talking to a couple who's been married 40+ years. They were finishing each other's sentences. Because they had figured each other out over those years.

There is a sense in which God, our heavenly Father, has invited us to figure him out. He's saying, “I don't want my will to be a mystery, I don't want you to drive down the road looking for signs on billboards that answer the questions of life for you, as if that's where I'm going to speak. I don't want you to have to guess what my will is. I've given you a slice of my mind right here. Become familiar with my heart, my mind, my ways, because as you become familiar with my thoughts and my ways, your ways will mirror my ways, your thoughts will begin to mirror my thoughts, you'll become more like me and you'll begin to figure out my will for your life.” That's the desire of God's heart.

I think the scripture has been given to us for that very purpose. Not just to know God's moral will for our lives—although that's important. But it's also more personal—that his ways would become our ways and our thoughts more like his thoughts.

The apostle Paul put it this way, **“Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is-- his good, pleasing and perfect will” (Romans 12:2, NIV)** The Greek word for “test and approve” is one Greek word. It means to sort out or discern. Paul's saying, “If you will begin to renew your mind, then you will be able to discern, you will be able to figure out, you will be able to sort through the options and come up with the answer, then you will be able to discern and discover what God's will is. His good, pleasing, perfect will.”

Do you see here that God has put the ball in our court? We have the opportunity, the honor and the privilege to renew our minds, renew our thinking, so that we think more like God, we see as God sees, then it's easier to know what to do in accordance with his will. That's pretty awesome! It's not about looking for some cryptic, hidden sign, some riddle that we might miss.

God has given us his word so that we can learn to think as God thinks, see as he sees, rather than just do what comes natural to us, because what comes natural is not always God's way. God's ways are higher than our ways. But those ways are accessible to us.

How does this get lived out? There are 3 places where God's ways are clearly higher than our ways, our natural inclinations. One is relationships. You do what you think you ought to do intuitively in a relationship and then you look in the scriptures and God's gone the other direction. Sometimes we struggle in relationships because we do what we think is logical, what our heart is telling us, and God's there saying, “This way, go back!” “But God that doesn't make any sense.” “My ways are not your ways, my thoughts are not your thoughts. Trust me for the outcome.”

Then there's finances. You look at what we do with our finances when we do what comes natural. We look at what the Bible says and it's such a challenge to us. Of course it's a challenge! Because his ways are not our ways, his thoughts are not our thoughts!

And then there's our physical life. The way we view our physical health and our bodies. The way we view that is often so different than God's view. In fact, in our experience, if you don't have any relationship problems, and you don't have any money problems, and you don't have any health problems, in our way of thinking, you don't have any problems, do you? I mean, if you could eliminate your relationship problems, your money problems and your health problems, anything else is like squeezing the toothpaste from middle. I can handle that.

But of those big three areas, our tendency is to go with what comes natural, what seems logical. We treat relationships as a means to our ends. We see our money as our money. We live our physical lives as if all there is is this physical life. No wonder we get ourselves into such messes when it comes to decision-making. Because especially in those three ways, his ways are not our ways, his thoughts are not our thoughts.

But something begins to change when we start to ask the question, "God, what is your will for my life?" And we create this category of the unknown. "God I see three options in this situation, but your ways are not my ways, your thoughts are not my thoughts, there may be a 4th way."

"God I see two ways. One spells disaster, one spells success from my perspective. But maybe from your perspective they're turned around." In our thinking and in our praying we've got to begin the decision-making process with this presupposition: "My ways are not his ways, my thoughts are not his thoughts. So God, through your word, show me your ways, teach me your thoughts and just as I figured out Mom and Dad by being around them, I want to figure you out and anticipate what you would have me do."

Let's make this practical. As you begin to read the Bible you've got to move beyond the way you normally read the Bible—for many of us, that is. Because lots of us read the Bible scanning for promises. Those places where God promises us something. There are books devoted to all the promises God makes in scripture. And we can read through looking for those promises, and there's nothing really wrong with that, except that our tendency is then to kind of take those promises to God like, "Hey God, look what I found. It says right here that you're supposed to do this for me, so get on it." It's like sometimes we want to tie God up with his promises and force him to live them out. "Here's what God has to do for me."

Look, don't read the Bible looking for leverage to get God to do something. Instead of just looking for promises, look for principles. **A principle is an unchangeable truth.** A principle is a way that God operates. Principles are timeless truths. Sometimes principles describe a cause-and-effect relationship. Sometimes they predict the outcomes of behaviors and attitudes. Here's the difference between a principle and a command. A command says, "Do this." A principle says, "Here's what's going to happen if you do...if you don't." You can disobey commands, but you don't disobey principles. The law of gravity is a principle. Gravity works whether you know about it or not, whether you believe in it or not. If you quit believing in gravity, nothing happens to gravity. It's the way the world works. In the same way God has given us in his word the way things work, relationally, financially, at every level of life.

The challenge becomes for us as we open this book is to say, "God I want to know your ways, I want to know your thoughts, show me, help me to discover the principles you've given so that I can begin to see as you see and make your ways my ways." That's what a principle is.

An example of a stated principle would be "You reap what you sow." In other words whatever you put into something you can expect to get something similar out. It doesn't matter if you're religious or not, you know this. You don't have to know anything about the Bible to get this. God just designed it that way.

Another example from the book of Proverbs. He who walks with the wise, grows wise, the companion of fools suffers harm. That's a principle. The people you spend the majority of your time with will have an impact on you and if you want to change your life, you're going to have to change who you spend a majority of your time with. It's a principle.

Here's another one. Raise up your children in the way they should go and when they are old they will not depart from it. The way you raise your children will have an impact on who they become as adults. If you set the anchor deep when they're young, it will pay off later on. I hear it all the time. Somebody says, "I was

raised in a Christian home but I wandered away and did all this other stuff, but I'm back!" I hear it all the time. It's a principle. You don't have to believe it, it just is. God set it up that way.

Sometimes principles aren't stated, just implied. Like the principle of unconditional love. It's not stated directly, but as you read the scriptures it's pretty clear that unconditional love is the most powerful force on the human soul. That nothing leverages change like unconditional love. Where there is hurt, or rejection, or sorrow—unconditional love has the power to change and reshape the human soul. You have a kid go prodigal on you, if you want to win back their hearts, you apply unconditional love. It's a principle.

The principle of purity. It's not stated directly in scripture but implied that purity now leads to intimacy later. That if you're pure on the front end of your dating life, you have a greater capacity for intimacy later on. If you're impure on the front end of your dating life you will suffer in areas of intimacy. It's just a principle. You don't have to believe it, you don't have to be religious or spiritual for it to be true, it just is.

These are the ways of God and they are right here. The mind of God right here. Sometimes they're stated, sometimes implied, sometimes principles are illustrated through narrative. Jesus did this a lot.

There's a principle illustrated through narrative in the Garden of Eden. It's the principle of freedom. Maximum freedom is found under God's authority. If you want the maximum freedom you can experience in this life, stay under God's authority. But the moment you move out from under God's authority, in that moment you begin losing freedoms. My logic, my natural impulses say that if I want to have freedom I have to get out from under authority. But my ways are not God's ways. Maximum freedom is found under our creator.

All this means learning to read this book differently. Not just looking for promises, but looking for principles. Finding the principles allows us to see through the fog of emotion, and the fog of circumstance, and the fog of bad counsel, and the fog of our past experience, and the fog of our inability to predict outcomes. It allows us to see beyond our limited context. It allows us to see through our perspective that is distorted by fear and pride. It allows us to get our head above all that and see clearly what God would have us to do. That's the power of principle; of becoming familiar with the ways of God.

The wisest thing we could do in terms of discerning God's will is to immerse ourselves in this book. Starting with the New Testament. Yes, a lot of what we do here on Sundays and Wednesdays is get our heads around some these principles, and that's very, very important. But as important as it is to be here on Sundays and jump in on Wednesday, those are still no substitute for you, on your own, immersing yourself in this book and allowing those principles to rise up to you. That journey of discovery on your own, is very, very valuable. The process of discovery is almost as important as the product.

That's why I tell you every week, get in here. Don't take my word for it, read it for yourself and in that journey you will see the principles, you will see a slice of the mind of God, you will begin to make the best decisions for your life and things will fall in place like never before. God's ways will become your ways, his thoughts will become your thoughts. Remember, it's not ultimately about you making good decisions based on knowing the will of God, it's about you and me knowing God himself. And for today that is the Good News.

I thank Rev. Andy Stanley, Senior Pastor of North Point Community Church, for his resources in this message.