

“Discovering God’s Will—Unfolding the Map”

We started this new year with a new series on discovering God’s will. When we look at our lives it doesn’t take much to realize that the lives we live are the result of the decisions we make. The better decisions we make, the better the outcome. The good news of this series is that God’s wants us to know his will so we live the best lives possible. God wants to be involved in our decision making process about the big things in our lives and the more daily things we face.

I want to wrap up this series by talking about a facet of discovering God’s will that’s kind of hard to get at, but it’s something that God uses over and over again. On the surface it might not seem relevant to determining God’s will, but on the back end you’ll see that it is very, very relevant. It’s the subject of vision.

Discovering God’s will through vision. That one of the primary ways that God will direct you and guide you in your life is by giving you a big picture vision for your life. And the clearer that vision is, the fewer options you have, and the easier it is to make a decision. A vision is basically a destination. It’s where you want to end up in life.

God wants to help you shape the picture of what can happen in your marriage; a picture of what can happen with your family; a picture of what can happen in your job; in your finances; if you’re single, in your dating relationships. **Vision is a mental image of what could be, fueled by the conviction that this is something that should be true of my life.** And as the vision gets clearer the distracting options get fewer and the decisions get easier.

A vision is sort of like the lid on a puzzle. I don’t do puzzles per se. Maybe someday. But when you’re doing puzzles you have this pile of pieces that are all scrambled, but the lid tells you what the end product is supposed to look like. The lid is the completed picture. It’s the goal of how all the pieces fit together.

A vision is the big picture, it’s the destination, it’s where things are going to end up. And as you and I develop a clear and clearer picture of different areas of our lives, it makes putting the pieces together, much, much easier. If you don’t have the lid--the big picture--then these, the pieces of the puzzle, are almost worthless. But if you have the lid, with enough thought and time, you can put things together.

Let’s talk examples. You’re here today and you’re single and in that whole dating thing. As you think about down the road, you want to be married. That’s great. This is a good time to paint the picture of what marriage looks like to you. Describe what a good marriage looks like to you—envision it. What could it be and what should it be? Listen, because if you don’t ever move beyond just, “I want to be married some day.” Then chances are someday, you’ll just be married! But that’s not what you want.

So paint a clearer picture of marriage—it looks like what for you?...mutual respect, accountability, intimacy, shared values, shared spirituality, share housework, whatever, you define it. And before you start asking, “Is he the one, is she the one?” You have to ask, “What is my vision of marriage, what could it be, what should it be?” Once you get that answered, then you can begin to see if he fits into that vision, if she fits into that vision. The clearer the vision is, the easier it is to evaluate the options and make good decisions—she’s not really an option, or she really does fit my vision.

Janet did this about me. She had a vision of marriage that she wrote out and she wrote out my positives and negatives. Her vision of marriage was a Godly relationship of mutual respect, passion, joy with a sexy, intelligent man. She ended up with me and should I die she is free to go find that man! Both of us had fairly clear visions of what marriage could be and should be and that helped both of us eliminate distracting possibilities and find each other.

A person or family decides to get their lives together in terms of finances. They begin to look at their debt, and spending habits, and what God says about stewardship and they begin to ask the question, “What could be and should be for me, or for us, financially? In terms of how we give, and how we spend, and how we save, and how we prepare for the future?” The clearer their financial vision comes into focus, the fewer distracting options there are and suddenly they’re changing habits and they can discern quickly what God’s will is about their finances. Because there’s a picture, they knew the destination.

The same is true in raising your kids. The same is true in every facet of life. **The clearer the vision, the fewer the options, the easier it is to make decisions.** What I've seen in my life again and again is that as I pray, "God, help me to see as you see, please give me your view of marriage, your view of my relationship with my kids, my finances, my profession. Please give me a mental picture of what you see for my life." As I begin to look at life from that perspective, decision making becomes so much easier, and it's so much easier to discern the will of God.

The truth is, everybody in this room has some general idea of where you want to end up in life. If I were to stop you and say, "Hey, tell me about what you want your marriage to look like in 5 years?" Words would come out of your mouth. You're not going to say, "I have no earthly idea." Same with your relationship with your kids. You'd say something. Everybody in this room has some general idea about the big areas of life. The problem is this: as long as it's just a general idea, it's not helpful in making decisions. "I just want to get married." That's not helpful. "I just want to have kids." That's not helpful. "I want to have a good job." Not helpful. Define these areas. Create a clear vision. The clearer the vision, the fewer the distracting options, the easier it is to make decisions.

And the thing about it is that you don't have to be a Bible scholar and you don't have to have been a Christian very long to understand what God has to say about these key areas of life. It's the kind of thing we talk about every single week here—family, marriage, career, sex, dating, and all those kinds of things.

As you begin to take the raw data and plug it in to your picture of a preferred future, you will be amazed at how easy it is to prioritize options and discern what it is God would have you do.

When I was in seminary I worked as an intern in two small churches in rural North Carolina. While I was there in the Summer I lived with a family, the Scholls. We still keep in contact, and besides my parents, Don and Nancy Scholl have been some of the most influential people in my life. Don was the head of the accounting department of a local branch of large company. He was respected in his company and in his field and had 6 or 7 opportunities to move up in the company but moving up meant moving out. It meant uprooting his wife and three kids, selling their home and small farm, relocating to another city in another part of the country.

Don chose not to advance in the company because his vision for his family was crystal clear. It was a vision of keeping his family intact, in one place, in one home, in one community, in one church. Their vision was clear which eliminated some options, which made decision-making easier. I talked to them last week and they love their lives.

Oh, and I'm not saying their way is the right way for everybody. But it rung my bell and I try to do the very same thing. And last week was our 15 year anniversary of coming to Saint Paul's. I don't have total control of where I serve as a pastor, but whenever I've been given a choice, I choose based on a very clear image of home, family, faith, community. **The clearer the vision, the fewer the options, the easier the decision making process.**

Now, with all this in mind, let's look at a situation in scripture that brings all this home. A situation that can help establish a standard for decision-making. This comes from the Old testament book of Nehemiah chapter 6. The city of Jerusalem has been destroyed and a man named Nehemiah gets a burden to rebuild the walls. A city without walls was nothing. It was weak, vulnerable, laughable. Nehemiah is in a foreign country and hears this about Jerusalem and he has this burden. Visions often start as burdens. And Nehemiah had this burden, this desire to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. The burden becomes a vision of what it would look like to carry that out.

Nehemiah rallies the people and starts the work of rebuilding the walls. But there are all kinds of problems. There's dissention within, there are threats from other nations, so for about 2 months he worked in leading the work of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem.

The more progress they made on rebuilding the walls, the more threatened neighboring nations became. These neighbors didn't want to see Jerusalem rise again, they didn't want to see a military, political,

economic power rise up. That's what the walls of Jerusalem represented. These other nations threaten attacks, they try to ruin Nehemiah's reputation, they're constantly trying to distract him from his work on the walls.

Finally the leaders of these other nations decide that there's no way to stop construction of the walls, so in Nehemiah chapter 6 we see their last ditch effort to stop the work. **"When word came to Sanballat, Tobiah, Geshem the Arab and the rest of our enemies that I had rebuilt the wall and not a gap was left in it--though up to that time I had not set the doors in the gates--Sanballat and Geshem sent me this message: 'Come, let us meet together in one of the villages on the plain of Ono'" (Nehemiah 6:1-2, NIV)**

These bad guys, Sanballat and the others, have finally figured out that their threats are not working and that the Israelites are going to finish the wall. They're thinking, "The best thing we can do is take out their leader." So they send Nehemiah this message, "Hey, come meet with us. Let's sit down and talk."

They didn't want to talk! They wanted to kill him or capture him. Verse two goes on and Nehemiah says, **"But they were scheming to harm me; so I sent messengers to them with this reply: 'I am carrying on a great project and cannot go down. Why should the work stop while I leave it and go down to you?' Four times they sent me the same message, and each time I gave them the same answer" (Nehemiah 6:2-4, NIV).**

Another version of the Bible puts it this way, **"I am doing a great work and I cannot come down."** Picture it: Nehemiah up on a ladder, up on the wall, working, leading, finishing something up. A messenger comes up and yells at him, "Hey, Nehemiah, there's a message here from Sanballat, he wants you to meet with him." Nehemiah knows what's up and from the top of the wall shouts down, "Tell him that I am doing a great work right here and I cannot come down." Sanballat asks 4, actually 5 times, and each time Nehemiah says the same thing, "I am doing a great work and I cannot come down."

The significance of the phrase, in that context, was that Nehemiah knew clearly what he was to do, rebuild the wall, and anything that contributed to rebuilding the wall was a "yes", and anything that would distract him from rebuilding the wall was a "no". Decision-making was very easy for Nehemiah, because once he had the big picture of what God wanted ultimately have happen, all the other options narrowed and prioritized, and it was easy to decide. **"I am doing a great work and I cannot come down."**

How might that apply to what you are doing with your family, your marriage, your kids, your spiritual life, your financial life? That's a phrase that has some power to it when you have sought God's guidance, created a clear vision, and everything that helps to fulfill that vision becomes a "yes" and everything that gets in the way of that vision becomes a "no".

Janet and I look at our kids and the lives they have ahead of them and the potential they have and what God's called us to be as parents, we think about all the things that could distract us from being all that God's called us to be as parents, "We're doing a great work and we will not come down."

I get invitations to do things or be on boards, or speak at events and I limit my participation in all that because, after my family, this congregation is my focus: "I am doing a great work and I cannot come down."

If you struggle with your priorities with your time between work and family, I'm telling you, if you want to do something powerful and life changing, walk into your kids' room at night while they're sleeping, hold their hand and say, "God thank you for my kids. Help me to realize that, I'm doing a great work and I cannot come down."

At work, put that on your desk somewhere, at your workstation somewhere where nobody else can see it, "I am doing a great work and I cannot come down."

Some of you, God has placed you in a position to do great things for his kingdom financially. You see a time in the future where you'll be able to invest more of your time and more of your money, and more of your ability in what God's doing in this world. But at the same time there are people coming after you with investment opportunities that are going to tie up your money longer, or start a business that's going to tie up your time a little bit longer. There are all kinds of distractions out there. But you know in your heart, "God has positioned me to do something unique with these blessings." Remember, "I'm doing a great work and I cannot come down." That may be a good opportunity but it's not what God has called you to do.

Some of you single adults. You've got standards that you've set high. Godly standards, a picture of the relationship you want to have. But that phone is ringing and you used to be in a relationship with him and he has no business being in the picture. You need to look at caller ID and say, "I am doing a great work and I cannot come down." "This isn't what I'm about anymore."

Some of you are new to Christianity and you are getting into the word and you are learning how to love God, and love others, and serve the world. That picture, that vision, of what God wants to do with your life is getting clearer and clearer. You're allowing yourself to be transformed by the renewing of your mind, and relationships, and everything. But here come all these opportunities, some good, some bad. You say, "I am doing a great work and I cannot come down." The decision becomes easier. Because as the vision got clearer, the options got fewer, the decision got easier. That's powerful.

I was talking to a young man last week who grew up here at Saint Paul's and has turned out to be an amazing man of God. He's in college down in Arkansas and is preparing to spend the summer overseas sharing the Gospel in a country in North Africa or Southeast Asia that is closed to Christianity. He's got a picture of what he wants to use his one and only life doing and he's not going to be dissuaded from that. If something gets in his way he'll be one to say, "I am doing a great work and I cannot come down."

Having that clear vision may mean you say no to good opportunities that come up because that great work is right where you are. But listen, having that clear vision may do just the opposite! You may have to leave what's familiar, and safe, and comfortable, and relocate, and start over because of the vision that God is helping you to clarify. And your home, and comfort, and familiarity may be the things you leave behind saying, "I am doing a great work and I cannot come down."

As you begin to catch a glimpse of what could be and should be in your life, decision making get's easier and God's will becomes clearer. Then it's a matter of saying at those key times, "That's a good idea, that's a good opportunity, but I am doing a great work right here and I cannot come down."

Here are 3 quick points of application. First, would you be willing to at least start praying that God would give you vision for your life in key areas? Just ask God for vision. Picture it like the top of a puzzle box, so you'll be able to see which pieces fit where.

Secondly, write it down. There's that journaling thing again. This doesn't have to be elaborate and lengthy. Here's that picture in my relational life, my spiritual life, my serving life, my financial life. It doesn't have to be a long treatise, but write down that vision so you can come back to it when a temptation, or a distraction, or even something that looks like a good opportunity comes up. Then you can look at all of that in light of the vision and narrow the options, and make easier decisions.

Over time it will change, God will shape it, and renew it, and reshape it. Some things will be added, some things will come out. But if you don't have anything out there you're thinking about, you lose a critical tool, a critical context, for making decisions.

The third thing is just to act according to that vision. Make decisions based on what could be and should be in your future. And anything that moves you toward that is a "yes" and anything that moves you away from that is a "no". And if you'll begin to think and respond this way, finding God's will will become so much easier.

You know something, that's a big reason we are the church we are. Because God's given that vision, it helps us to focus what we do, and that makes decisions much easier and much more fruitful.

God wants his will to be known, he's not hiding, it's not meant to be a mystery. And as we get to know God's will, we get to know God himself and that is the ultimate goal and for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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