

The Will of God

Acts 20:13-35



Another instalment of Mark's strange signs. Signs are here to help us make choices. Confusion of road signs in Spain. Signs can somehow not help but hinder.

I have spoken recently about the need to discern the Lord's will for our life together as a church and for our lives individually. it's not something you do once or twice in your life but it's ongoing.

And that's the problem. We have no problem with the notion that God guides. Our problem with it invariably is that we rarely ask! *Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. (Luke 11:9-10 NIV)*

I'm going to come back to this in a few minutes because I believe that for most Christians this is the problem that is most central to divine guidance issues.

As I said most of us have a problem with the notion that God guides His people. But who leads who? As you know, we have a dog Judy. Judy likes to lead but, for her safety she often has to be led. When we ask God to guide us, do we ask Him for guidance for OUR way, or to hear and obey the words "Follow me". We as His people should be committed to discerning His will and walking in that. But it's one thing to say it, it's another to know practically what God's will is for our lives.

What is God's will? It's basically what God wants. In the NT this idea is expressed by the word *thelema* - what one wishes or has determined shall be done e.g. *of the purpose of God to bless mankind through Christ, of what God wishes to be done by us, commands, precepts, will, choice, inclination, desire, pleasure (Strong).*

◆ God's Sovereign Will

The first thing I want to say about God's will is that God is omnipotent – all powerful – and quite frankly, as Creator and Sustainer of the universe he can do just whatever He wants to. We call this the sovereign will of God. God is sovereign and that means He will do whatever He wants whenever He wants. But God only acts in accordance with His own nature – therefore His actions can only reflect His nature – love, holiness, purity, justice and so on.

The amazing thing about God is that He's willed it so that there are creatures in His creation that like Him, have minds of their own and have freedom to do things according to their own will. We as human beings fall into that category – angels also do if you are wondering who else does.

◆ God's Permissive Will

This aspect of the will of God is known as God's permissive will. God in His sovereign wisdom decided that human beings were in charge of their own destiny. He even gave our race a responsibility: Genesis. We were endowed with many aspects of God's nature (items) and creativity but with all that came with responsibility. God knows how to use His power responsibly and God was happy to give Adam the benefit of His wisdom and knowledge.

But in doing so God opened the possibility – or perhaps the inevitability – that the human race would get ahead of itself and think it wiser than God and do its own thing. Sin and evil didn't start with God, it started when God's created beings who had the freedom of the will to make responsible decisions acted irresponsibly.

I quite like this quote from Dr Martin Luther King which describes the situation well:

There are two aspects to God's will. On the one hand, God has an ultimate, absolute causal will. At this point God neither thinks, nor causes, nor cooperates with evil, for God has an absolute ultimate causal will which only causes good. But then there is another aspect to God's will and that is God's permissive will. Since God through his absolute ultimate causal will decided to give man freedom, he had to make it possible for evil to exist if man did not properly use their freedom.

Dr Martin Luther King.

And as a result of people's desire to do their thing, the human race became separated from God. But of course we see the mercy and love of God as he gave His own Son for our redemption. He brought us back; opening for us that choice to follow Jesus and to serve the purposes of God. Which reveals to us another aspect of God's will – a desire to see men and women return to Him. But again, the permissive will of God makes it their choice. The will of God is His desire for the lives of men and women. His desire is that all will come to repentance (2 Peter 3:9). It's God's will. Here's where we see will as a desire because He knows what's best for us. In the end we need to accept that through faith, just as well as we should listen to what God says in His word to follow Him.

This we all know, but there's another aspect to God's will. If we are His people, if we have accepted Christ, the God desires that we walk according to His will. We are called to obey Him. Because it's in obedience we find the fulfilment in life etc.

But how do we know God's will in our daily lives. How do we know what God's will is for us.

→ God's Moral Will – through His written word.

God as our creator and as believers, as our Father has made known His moral will for our lives. How do we know what is right and wrong? God has our Creator has already wired it into us. Take a look at Romans 1

Romans 1: 20 For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities--his eternal power and divine nature--have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. 21 For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. 22 Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools 23 and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.

Each person has that innate sense of the existence of God but as Paul looked at the history of man he saw that people in their "wisdom" turned to worship other things. This innate knowledge of God also extends to our consciences which are able to discern right from wrong and it is this we can appeal to when we talk to people about Him e.g.

2 Cor 4:2 Rather, we have renounced secret and shameful ways; we do not use deception, nor do we distort the word of God. On the contrary, by setting forth the truth plainly we commend ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God.

However, the way in which we understand God's moral will for our lives is through God's word. We know what God desires of our moral standards because it's clearly written in black and white. Some people see the foundation of our morality as the Ten Commandments. In one sense they are, but as Jesus points out in Matthew, it was quite easy for people to keep the letter of them and miss what God actually requires of His people in terms of a purity of love in thought and not just in deed (Matthew 5). The Pharisees were a fine example of people who kept the Law, but their hearts and their deeds showed that they loved themselves and not God or their neighbour. Jesus correctly points out that the whole of the law and the prophets are summed up in just this statement:

Matt 22: 36 "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" 37 Jesus replied: " Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: ` Love your neighbour as yourself.' 40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

This idea of loving God and one another is the most persistent element in Jesus' teaching. It's because we are not called to keep moral law for the sake of it, but that we think, speak and act from

our hearts and that is controlled by one simple principle - love - agape, the act of will and passion that puts God and others before ourselves in all that we say or do. The rest of God's requirements in the Old and New Testaments are living examples of how that works and represent as the psalmist puts it Your word is a lamp for my feet and a light for my path. As we walk through life, we find that the word of God is living and relevant.

Why do I say all this apart from encouraging you to seek God through His Word? It's because there are many issues in life we should take as read and not bother to search God for more specific guidance. If you fall out with your brother and sister in Christ, then make it up. Don't bother to search hard for whether you should or not. Similarly, if someone offends you, don't hunt for whether you should forgive them or not. You just do.

The Bible is full of plenty of advice on how to live your life. Our problem is that so often we don't meditate upon it with the kind of enthusiasm the psalmist had and as a result we haven't a clue what God wants and ask for guidance when we don't need to because it's been there for thousands of years!

But let's not go down the Pharisees road like some Christians do as I preached on a few months back. I was brought up in a church where the Word of God was revered and examined carefully to make sure we lived to every jot and tittle. But where was the passion for God? Where was the passion to please God? They used their intellect to try to work out what God had said, but they didn't call upon His Spirit to open the Word to them to make it real in their lives.

God speaks to us through His Word and by His Spirit. If we ask the Spirit for answers, don't expect to get too many unless you know and love God's written word because answers to most issues in life there and God has inspired a book so that He can use its words in your life and mine.

→ God's Particular Will

However, we don't just believe in a God who just speaks through a book, but a Father who has entered our lives by His Spirit. Therefore we can seek God for guidance in all areas of our lives. In the passage we had read to us this morning we saw that Paul and his party were led by the Spirit in the practicalities of their journey to Jerusalem:

◆ Allowed Himself to be led by the Spirit

22 "And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there.

The Spirit led Him and as a result Paul felt compelled to go to Jerusalem. The Spirit leads, we follow. As we shall explore next week, God's will can sometimes be difficult to follow - Paul knew the end was not good. But he felt compelled. What made Paul feel compelled? It wasn't doing something against his will, but being convinced of whom he had placed his trust. Take a look in 2 Cor 5 and you'll see what I mean:

11 Since, then, we know what it is to fear the Lord, we try to persuade men. What we are is plain to God, and I hope it is also plain to your conscience. 12 We are not trying to commend ourselves to you again, but are giving you an opportunity to take pride in us, so that you can answer those who take pride in what is seen rather than in what is in the heart. 13 If we are out of our mind, it is for the sake of God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. 14 For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died.

Paul did what he did because He was compelled by Christ's love. It is the Spirit who convinces us of sin, righteousness and coming judgement and who convinces us on that basis of God's will in our lives.

◆ The Spirit revealed the future on a need to know basis

23 I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me.

In fact, later in Chapter 20, God's will is further revealed to him by the prophet Agabus. Why do I say all this. because God speaks to us today by His Spirit just as He did in the past. It is the Holy Spirit that opens up the understanding of God's Word, but it is also the Spirit who shows us the direction

of our lives. And that direction is individual to each of us. The issue is not whether God leads us in this way because that's beyond question; but whether we do.

Where does that take us? If we want to know God's will in our lives, we need to spend more time in His presence; reading His word, spending time in prayer. But often how little we do. We'll look at some of the problems and hindrances in seeking God's particular will for our lives next time I preach.

Let me go back to a verse I gave you earlier. So we want to know God's will? Then ask the question!

Ask and it will be given to you; seek and you will find; knock and the door will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives; he who seeks finds; and to him who knocks, the door will be opened. (Luke 11:9-10 NIV)

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