

About Discerning God's Will

Pent 7C 2007 | Colossians 1.1-14

Series Intro

This summer,
we're exploring your responses
to the sentence: What Lutherans Believe about . . ."
It's not too late to make your suggestion
on a yellow communication card!
This morning, we're going to tackle
what Lutherans believe about
discerning God's will for our lives.

Ways to Determine God's Will

At some point in our lives,
we come to a point in our faith journey
when we may wonder whether
we are following God's will for our lives.
Perhaps, we're facing a significant life decision,
and we want to be sure we're doing what God wants;
important decisions like:

- Do I marry that special someone?
- Do we adopt a little girl from China?
- Do I go to college or go straight into the work force?

I suppose there are lots of ways to try to discern God's will
on which way we should take in life.

An old Scottish woman had one method
as she went from home to home across the countryside
selling thread, buttons, and shoestrings.
When she came to an unmarked crossroad,
she would toss a stick into the air
and go in the direction the stick pointed when it landed.

One day, however, she was seen
tossing the stick up several times.
"Why do you toss the stick more than once?" someone asked.
"Because," replied the woman, "it keeps pointing to the left,
and I want to take the road on the right."
She then kept throwing the stick into the air
until it pointed the way she wanted to go!ⁱ

Is *that* how we should discern God's will?!

Once upon a time, another person
was struggling with what to do,

so he decided to do something pretty smart:
he decided to dust off his Bible
and seek God's guidance there.
He opened it up, picked a verse at random and read:

*He owned a field, sold it, brought the money,
and gave it to the apostles.*

Acts 4:37 (NCV)

Well, THAT didn't sound like such a good idea.
Although he didn't own a field, he had a very nice house,
thank you very much, and he didn't much like the idea
of selling it in this bad housing market.

But then he thought,
I wonder what *Jesus* would want me to do?
So he opened his Bible up to the Gospels this time,
he picked another verse at random and read:

*Jesus said to him,
"If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions,
and give the money to the poor,
and you will have treasure in heaven;
then come, follow me."*

Matthew 19:21 (NRSV)

Oh, NO! That can't be right!
Jesus couldn't want me to sell my house.
Let me try once more, he said to himself.
So he opened his Bible a third time . . .
very, very carefully . . . and read,
*Jesus said, "Go quickly
and do what you have to do."*

John 13:27 (CEV)

There are a lot of misconceptions
about what constitutes Gods' will.
It seemed unclear to at least a few of you as well,
since there were several yellow cards asking about it.
I want us to look at two questions:
What is God's will? and
How can I apply it to my life?

I What is God's Will?

The apostle Paul prays in his letter to the Colossians that
*you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will
in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,
so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord,
fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit*

*in every good work and as you grow
in the knowledge of God.*

Colossians 1:9-10 (NRSV)

What does this tell us?

It tells us that

God's will is something that can be known.

It is something that God desires us to know
and to follow to the best of our ability;
faithfully, not perfectly.

It is something that God reveals to us
if we have the eyes of faith to see it.

Sometimes, in order to see God's will more clearly,
it's helpful to explore what God's will isn't.

It's not a feeling.

God's will is *not* a feeling

This is the mystical approach to God's will
and it appeals to all of us who are right brain people.
We right brainers are out there looking for a feeling,
looking for a sensation, looking for that quiver in our liver.
We want God just to touch our emotions
so we'll know exactly what to do.

The problem with this
is that feelings are highly unreliable.
Feelings can come from fatigue,
from our hormones, from an event we've experienced,
from something we've read or seen;
even from the pizza we ate last night.
We may say, "But it *feels* right,"
but that doesn't mean that it is right.
Feelings lie.

The prophet Jeremiah reminds us of this:

*The heart is deceitful above all things
and beyond cure.*

Jeremiah 17:9 (NIV)

That means my heart plays tricks on me.
It's good to be in touch with our feelings;
to not suppress them.
But it isn't helpful to base our actions only on our feelings.
Feelings alone can guide us in the wrong way.
God's will is not a feeling.

Not a Formula

Neither is God's will a formula

This is the mechanical approach to God's will
and it appeals to those of us who are left brain people.
Left brainers are logical and rational.
We've got it all figured out.
We want to look for a formula.
We want a recipe.
We want a step by step procedure, a ritual.
Follow these 27 steps and you're guaranteed results.

Check out the bestseller list at Borders or on Amazon.com:
many of them are these 10 Easy Step-type books:

Seven Habits for Highly Effective Families.

Cooking for Dummies.

An Idiot's Guide Building a Nuclear Reactor.

Embalming Made Easy.

We want these simple step by step things
for the most difficult things.

There are two problems
with the formula approach to God's will.
In the first place,
there's no room for failure or mistakes.
If God's will is a recipe,
what if you leave out one ingredient?
If you leave baking soda out of a recipe
you've got the difference between
a birthday cake and a pancake.
What if I have 52 Steps to Knowing God's Will
and I leave out number 37?

As your pastor, let me say this:
God's will is not a closed system.
God's will is dynamic.
God's will is not always an issue of choosing A **or** B.
In fact, many times God's will may be A **to** Z
and any of them will be ok. It's your choice.
I believe there is far more freedom in God's will
than we realize.

Then, there's a second problem
with this formula approach to God's will.
There's the issue of "God has this recipe formula,
but I blew it ten years ago.
I made this really stupid decision.
I walked away from God. I didn't do the right thing.
I'm paying for it still. For the rest of my life

I must settle for second best because of the dumb decision I made 10 or 15 or 50 years ago.”

There’s only one problem with that view.

It’s isn’t biblical either.

No where in the Bible do we find the phrase “second best.”

My Bible tells me that great believers often made major, enormous, monumental mistakes.

But it doesn’t say that God gave up on them.

If God did, we wouldn’t have had

Moses to lead the people out of slavery in Egypt.

After all, he was a murderer.

We wouldn’t have had

David who secured Israel’s borders.

After all, he was both a murderer AND an adulterer.

We wouldn’t have had

Paul who led the early Christian mission to the Gentiles that resulted in most of us sitting here today.

After all, he was a mass murderer,

persecuting the early church to its very core.

My Bible does say God delights in giving second chances.

There’s nothing in the Bible about second best.

There’s a whole lot in the Bible about second chances.

God’s will isn’t a feeling and it isn’t a formula.

Neither should we consider

everything that happens around us to be God’s will.

Often, when some major problem happens

we hear people say, “It must have been God’s will.”

Yuck! I really don’t like it when someone says that.

As if God’s will are all the bad things in life.

and all the good things in life are a matter of luck.

You’ve seen an insurance policy and what they list as “Acts of God”: hurricanes, earthquakes, tornadoes.

It seems to me genuine “Acts of God” are

a baby being born,

Jr. High and Sr. High students

saying ‘no’ to unhealthy peer pressure, or

an abused spouse finding the courage

to leave an abusive marriage.

Those are acts of God.

Whenever tragedy strikes,

that's never God's will,
because God isn't the author of evil.
But God set up the world in such a way
that we have the freedom to choose
and sometimes human beings choose evil.
And sometimes when people choose evil,
innocent people get hurt.
When that happens, it's never God's will.

So what *is* God's will?

It is a relationship.

The whole of the Old Testament is the story
of a God who wants to be in relationship with people.
God created them.
God saved them from slavery in Egypt.
God brought them into their own land.
God established them in their own community
and placed leaders over them.
God established a whole faith system
so that the people could worship God.
When the people strayed,
God sent prophets
to help them understand their disobedience
and to bring them back into relationship with God.

When all that didn't work, God sent a son;
flesh of God's own flesh; a chip off the old block.
Paul reminds us of this when he writes to the Corinthians,
*God is the one who invited you
into this wonderful friendship with his Son,
Jesus Christ our Lord.*

1 Corinthians 1:9 (NLT)

This is God's will, Paul tells the Ephesians,
*He destined us for adoption as his children
through Jesus Christ,
according to the good pleasure of his will.
God has made known to us the mystery of his will,
according to his good pleasure that he set forth
in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time,
to gather up all things in him,
things in heaven and things on earth.*

Ephesians 1:5,9-10 (NRSV)

And still later,
*For we are what God has made us,
created in Christ Jesus for good works,*

which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.

Ephesians 2:10 (NRSV)

God's will is to be our Savior and friend.
God's will is to draw all people into a love relationship with him.
God's will is that we live out our faith in service to others,
extending Hope in Jesus in ways that help accomplish God's will.

That is so mind blowing, it's amazing.
God says I want you to have a relationship with me.
And I will do whatever it takes to make that happen.
What is God's will? It's a relationship.
The key is focus on God not guidance.

When I first got married to Karen,
I needed a lot of guidance as a husband.
A LOT of guidance as a husband.
Fortunately she was very eager to give it.
The first year of our marriage was sprinkled with phrases like
"You need to do this, honey. . . ." and
"You should try that, dear"
She was encouraging
about giving me guidance as her new husband.

18 years and 364 days later,
I believe I know Karen pretty well.
I can read her moods
and her non-verbal communication pretty well.
Because of our connectedness,
I usually know how she's going to react
on those rare, those *exceedingly* rare days,
when I do something stupid.
After all this time,
she doesn't have to give me
a lot of rules and regulations and guidance.
Sometimes I just watch her eyes,
and I know exactly what she's thinking
by the kind of look she gives me.
That's part of building an intimate relationship.

That's the kind of relationship God wants with us.
The key is focus on God not guidance.
The better we get to know God,
the less confusion we'll have about what God's will is.

II How Can We Apply God's Will?

This brings us to our other key question:
How can we apply God's will to our life?
There are some basic guidelines the Bible gives us
on how we should act toward one another.

There's the 10 Commandments that God gave Moses;
the prophet's call to return to God's teachings;
the two commandments that Jesus shared with his friends;
and lists of dos and don'ts Paul shared with his community.
We can find a number of such 'laundry lists'
of ethical behavior codes recorded in the Bible.
Some – like all the dos and don'ts
about ritual purity and dietary laws –
don't apply because we're not Jewish.
Other teachings on how to act toward one another
still do apply.

But often we wrestle with the question
What about those issues Scripture doesn't address?
How can we know what God's will is in these cases?
I think there are 5 important principles from Scripture
that can guide us with this.

Admit that We Need Guidance

Sometimes this is tough because
you and I don't like to admit it when we're confused.
Men especially don't like to do this.
One person has told me
that's why men have the "Y" chromosome.
It's because when someone (usually our wife)
tells us to stop and ask for directions,
we typically respond with "Why?"

It is not in our human nature
to stop and ask for directions.
That's why, when it comes to knowing God's will,
it takes some real courage to admit it.
But the first step if we want to know God's will
is admit our confusion.

The psalmist reminds us:
*God leads the humble in the right way
and teaches them his will.*

Psalms 25:9 (GNT)

Ask

Our second principle is to ask in faith for directions.

James encourages us with this when he writes,
*If you want to know what God wants you to do,
ask him, and he will gladly tell you.
He will not resent your asking.
But when you ask him,
be sure that you really expect him to answer,
for a doubtful mind is as unsettled
as a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed
by the wind.*

James 1:5-6 (NLT)

Notice in this verse,
there are two keys to knowing God's wisdom.
First we've got to ask the right person - God.
We don't ask our manicurist,
our bartender or some other reliable authority
like a talk show radio host.
We ask the right person, God.
Then we ask *expecting God to answer*.
Have you ever asked God to lead you
but you didn't really expect Him to?
That may be why we didn't get anything from it.
We ask expecting an answer.
God honors faith. God promises wisdom.

Listen for God's response

This leads to our third principle:

Listen for God's response.

This is where I sometimes get off track.
The truth is I sometimes allow myself
to become too busy to listen for God's response.
We schedule ourselves from dawn to dusk,
so we ask and then we rush right in
to whatever we were going to do in the first place
and don't take time to hear
what God might want to say to us.

We have to take the time to tune in
and to listen because God is speaking.

Job tells us this when he says,

*God does speak,
sometimes one way, sometimes another
even though people may not understand it."*

Job 33:14 (NCV)

The question is "How do we understand it?
How can we tune in so we can hear God's voice?"

In this room there are radio waves filling this room.
You and I can't hear them because we're not a radio.
We can't tune in the pew we're sitting on
to play those radio waves.
It takes a radio to do that.
God has designed each of us
to be able to tune into and hear God's voice.
Nothing else in all creation can tune into God's voice
like you and I can.
We were designed to hear messages from God.

How do we tune in?
What are the channels that God uses?
There are lots of them,
but let me remind you of two of them.

Listen for God's response through the Bible.

A lot of people like to call the Bible, "the good book."
It is a good book but I'd rather call it The Guidebook.
Think of this as your Thomas Guide for Life.
I carry a Thomas Guide for Fresno and Madera County
in my car so I know how to find your house
when I come and visit.

That's what the Bible is for us in our spiritual journey.
We carry this with us through life
so it shows us the next step to take.
That is why we need to read this book every day.
When you and I don't have a daily devotion time
it's like taking the telephone connection with God
off the hook so there's a busy signal all the time.
We have to keep this constant connection
because God's will is found in God's Word.
The scripture reading list
on the back of the insert page today.
One resource by which you and I
can go deeper in our relationship with God;
remain open to hearing God's will for us.

Second, **we can listen for God's response through teachers** – people teach what this book says.
Have you ever been in a class
and you felt like as a teacher was teaching
that God was speaking directly to you?
A lot of us have felt that way.
And the fact is, at that moment He was speaking to you.

That's the importance for me
of the various Bible Studies we have here at Hope.
It's great – and even necessary – to read Scripture
each day on our own.
But we also need the teaching of a small group leader
or a pastor or a Bible Study leader
to help us make sense of the difficult passages.

Trust God When We Don't Understand

And then, there's the fourth principle:

Trust God when we don't understand.

In the book of Proverbs we hear this encouraging word,

*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.*

Prov. 3:5-6 (NIV)

If we do the trusting God does the willing.
When you and I don't understand
when God's telling us to do something,
this is a test. It is an obedience check.
And if we're going to grow spiritually,
God is going to take us through obedience checks
over and over in life.
God will ask us to do something
that humanly does not seem to make sense.
It's a test. He's testing if we'll trust Him.

One great example of this
is the story in the Old Testament
when the children of Israel had finally been set free
from 400 years of slavery in Egypt
and Moses leads them out into the desert
and they come up to the Red Sea
and there are mountains on either side,
an ocean in front of them
and the Egyptian army in hot pursuit behind them.
They're in God's little cul-de-sac.
Talk about a dead end!
They start to doubt and wonder and say,
"Did we miss God's will?
Did we hear God right?
We thought He wanted us to leave in freedom.
We thought Moses was the man
we were supposed to follow.
We thought we'd made the right decision.

Now look! We're going to get killed!
It would have been better for us to stay slaves in Egypt
rather than get annihilated here
on the edge of the ocean."
But God had them exactly where He wanted them.
He was testing them.
It looked impossible but God had not made a mistake.

Moses later gave thanks to God and said,
*Your road led through the sea,
a pathway no one knew was there!*

Psalm 77.19 (NLT)

Nobody knew it was there. God did.

That's a parable of life.
You may be at what you think is a dead end.
"We're never going to get out of debt!
I'm never going to get out of this problem!
Things are never going to work out!
My dream is never going to come true!
We're never going to have a baby."
Right now it may look dark
and it may look depressing
and you may feel defeated
and it may seem like a mystery to you
but if you will trust in God,
and as you move ahead in faith
and as you keep growing,
God will make a pathway through the middle of the ocean.
And the waves will apart.

You might think, "That doesn't make sense!"
Not everything in the world makes sense.
We'll be frustrated if we try to figure it all out.
And we'll be tempted to despair.
One day we'll see in the light of eternity
how it all fits together in God's timing and God's plan.
One day.
But until that time
what do we do when God tells us to do something
that doesn't make sense?
We do it anyway and relax.
Because when we relax we're saying,
"God, I trust You."
I don't understand this but I trust You."

Act On What We Already Know To Do

This brings us to our final principle:

Act on what we already know to do.

The truth is, you and I already know a lot of things God wants us to do.

So why haven't we done it?

God won't give us more until we can handle what we have already.

Some of us keep saying,

"I want to know God's will for my career/marriage."

and God's says, "Let's get to the basics.

Are you reading the Bible?

Are you in a small group?

Are you tithing?

Are you praying to God?"

As we are faithful in these little ways, God will be faithful to make clear God's will in other, more significant ways.

How can we apply God's will to our lives?

- ✓ Admit that we need guidance;
- ✓ Ask in faith for direction;
- ✓ Listen for God's response;
- ✓ Trust God when we don't understand; and
- ✓ Act on what we already know to do.

May God give us what we need to be doers of his will.

Amen

¹10,000 Sermon Illustrations. 2000 (electronic ed.). Dallas: Biblical Studies Press.