

Following Jesus Requires Knowing His Will

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[0 : 00] Romans chapter 12 begins this way. The Apostle Paul writes, I appeal to you, therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

I'll tell you a little something about myself. I don't particularly enjoy making a lot of decisions. And what I mean is I don't enjoy making a lot of small, probably arbitrary decisions, decisions that really don't bear much weight.

When I go to a restaurant, for instance, I do not want a 100-page menu like you get at Cheesecake Factory. We were talking about this the other day. If there were a restaurant simply called Meat, Potatoes, and Bread, I'd go to that place any day of the week.

That's why I always liked Waffle House when I lived in the South. They have waffles, I know that. That's good enough for me. And I'm not alone either. I've read how presidents, modern presidents at least, of the United States, generally do not choose their clothing in the morning.

[1 : 22] Somebody else picks out their suits and ties. And we commonly see many of the bigwig tech CEOs wearing the same exact outfit every single day.

Think of Steve Jobs wearing that black turtleneck. These people have a lot of big decisions to make throughout the day, and so they don't want to waste time and effort making all of the small ones.

Now, as much as I don't care for the small decisions, obviously the big ones present a different kind of challenge. Should I take this job?

Should I buy this car? Should I live here or there? Should I marry this person or not? But along the way, we all have some pretty big decisions to make.

And of course, the Christian's great concern is, what is the Lord's will in this matter? As followers of Christ, none of us want to live outside of God's will.

[2 : 21] We do not want to make a decision that would go against His will and, of course, suffer the consequences of that. But how can we know the Lord's will? I'll tell you a brief story.

Back in 2008, 2009, I was recently ordained for pastoral ministry, and I was waiting for an opportunity to serve a church somewhere.

After several months, I was traveling pretty much every other weekend. Six churches across five states were considering me as a candidate for pastor.

So I spent a lot of time on the road and in airports, and I spent a lot of time praying, Lord, what is your will? Give me clarity. Help me to know where I should go.

I often said a prayer that you've probably prayed yourself. Lord, give me peace in making a decision. You see, I knew the time would eventually come when one of these churches would likely call me to be their pastor, and I would have a pretty big decision to make.

[3 : 25] At least five of the six churches would require me moving across the country. And I'll admit I was a little nervous. I was nervous because I didn't want to make the wrong decision. You know, it's one thing to choose a lousy meal at a restaurant.

The consequences don't last that long. But packing up, moving across the country to take a new job, that's not a decision to make lightly. And things got a little more complicated when two different churches asked me to be their pastor within a week of each other.

Now, my decision wasn't a simple yes or no. I had to choose between the two, potentially. So, on the one hand, I could serve a church near my home, which would be very convenient.

But I also knew I'd have my work cut out for me. In this particular case, unfortunately, the church was struggling through some pretty serious division among the people. On the other hand, I could

go to a church far from home that seemed to be perfectly united with one another, but I'd have to make a pretty big sacrifice.

You see, at the time, Danae and I were still dating, and we were currently working through some pretty big, let's call them theological differences.

[4 : 42] And I thought, if I moved away, there was a decent chance we simply would not make it. I thought the relationship would probably end. Thankfully, I was very wrong, but that was one of the things going through my mind at the time.

Ultimately, though, I just wanted to know the Lord's will. I wanted him to make the decision very plain, very obvious to me.

You know, I was very tempted to throw my fleece on the ground overnight and to see what would happen, you know. It worked for Gideon. Maybe I could cast lots. I suspect many of you have been in a similar position.

You've been desperate to know the Lord's will for your life. Maybe you've even prayed to Him to show you a sign. Maybe that sign didn't come. I know this is very prevalent among young people. I've had these conversations. Does God want me to go to this school or that one? Should I study this subject or some other subject? Should I become a doctor, a lawyer, a missionary?

[5 : 48] What does the Lord want me to do? Well, that's our subject today. How do we know the Lord's will for us? We're still considering what it means to follow Jesus, and knowing the Lord's will is certainly a relevant subject.

How can we follow Him if we don't know what He wants for us? Now, we'll look at Romans 12 in a moment. But first, let's think about God's will in general.

You know, we tend to make reference to God's will quite often, but we don't always make much effort to define it. What does the Bible tell us about His will? Admittedly, the phrase, will of God, can be kind of confusing.

Sometimes we are talking about slightly different things when we use that phrase. For example, we may be talking about God doing things according to His sovereign will.

Other times we may be talking about His commandments. When we obey His commandments, we refer to that as doing God's will or doing the will of God. And if that weren't enough to confuse us, we have a third way of talking about the will of God, which requires a bit more explanation.

[7 : 07] So we'll come to that. Let's start with what is often called God's hidden will. We can also call it His will of decree.

In other words, we're talking about God being God. We're talking about how Almighty God ordains what will happen within His creation.

He is, after all, God. He is sovereign over everything. His will, His decrees will inevitably come to pass. What He wills will happen.

And we see this very clearly throughout Scripture. From the biggest events to the smallest, God ordains what comes to pass. For example, listen to how the brethren talk about the crucifixion of Christ in Acts chapter 4.

In verse 27, they say in prayer, Now that's a profound statement.

[8 : 28] It's very similar to what Peter said when speaking to the people of Jerusalem. He said to them in Acts 2, This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, He says, You, crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.

While everyone involved, Herod, Pilate, the Romans, the Jews, They were all personally and really responsible for Christ's death.

The Bible also says Jesus died according to God's predestined plan. He ordained the crucifixion to take place. It was a wicked act of men, but God ordained it.

Proving that God is sovereign over all, And because He is sovereign over all, He can bring good out of even the worst circumstances. Yes, the Lord's crucifixion was by the hands of lawless men, But it happened only because God predestined it to take place.

Now, that's an example of God ordaining a big event. The biggest, in fact. But what about the small things in this life? Is He intimately involved in the minute details?

[9 : 49] Well, in Matthew 10, verse 29, Jesus says, Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father.

In other words, not a single bird falls from the sky apart from God's will. Now, this is in sharp contrast to what the deist believes about God.

The deist says God created the world and essentially left it to run its course, whatever the course that may be. He may intervene now and then, but he's mostly uninvolved.

He's mostly detached. He just sort of sits back and watches everything play out. But that's not what Jesus said. Not a single sparrow will fall apart from God's will.

And if you wonder what a sparrow has to do with us, notice what Jesus said next in verse 30. Even the hairs of your head are all numbered. If God is personally and intimately involved in the fate of birds, you better believe He's personally and intimately involved in our lives.

[11:00] After all, we're His image bearers. We are His most special creation. Psalm 139, verse 16 says, Your eyes saw my unformed substance.

God knows everything about us.

He knows the number of hairs on our heads. He knows the number of days we will live. And He has known these things since before we even came into existence. And He knows these things not because He can see into the future.

Yes, He can see into the future. But He knows these things because He ordained them. He decreed them. He willed them. Isaiah 46, verses 9 and 10 say, I am God, and there is none like Me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose.

God knows all things because He ordained all things. As R.C. Sproul used to say, there isn't a single maverick molecule in the universe.

[12:24] Everything is under God's sovereign control. Everything happens according to God's sovereign will. But God's will of decree is also a hidden will.

In Isaiah, He says, For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts. So put another way, He's God, and we're not.

We can't possibly know everything He knows. We'd like to, but we can't. Most of His decreed will is hidden from us. The only way we can know His decreed will is if, first of all, He reveals it to us, right?

That's what we have in His promises concerning the future. But even then, we don't necessarily have all of the details. Second, we can know something about His decreed will from the Bible, from history books, from past experience.

We can see the hand of God at work in what has already taken place, but again, all of the reasons why those things took place may still be hidden.

[13:36] Deuteronomy 29, 29 is what we might call the definitive text regarding God's hidden will. It says, So, part of God's will is hidden.

And Deuteronomy says we should not be overly concerned with it. It's hidden. It's secret. It belongs to God alone. We can't know it, and we don't need to know it.

But Deuteronomy also says God has a revealed will. And we can know that will. In fact, Moses says it belongs to us. It's meant for us.

God reveals it for us. He wants us to know it. We could look at many examples of this, but 1 John 2 speaks of God's revealed will.

This is not what God ordains. It's what He desires for us. In verses 15 through 17, John writes, Do not love the world or the things in the world.

[14:51] If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and the pride of life is not from the Father, but is from the world.

And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever. Now obviously, John isn't talking about God's sovereign decrees here.

Otherwise, we would really have no option but to do the will of God. Instead, he implores his readers to obey God by doing the will of God. In other words, God has revealed His will for us and we are responsible for following that will, for doing that will.

Now the question before us is, how does God reveal His will? How does He tell us what He wants us to do? How do we know? Well, let's start with what should be plain to us.

We have the Bible. As I've quoted a few times throughout this series, all Scripture is breathed out by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

[16:15] Scripture is God's clear revelation of what He wants us to know. Through the Bible, He has given us His will in black and white.

In Ephesians 2, Paul says the church is built on the foundation of the apostles and the prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone. Of course, the apostles and the prophets were largely responsible for pinning the Bible and while I'm not an expert builder, I know enough to know that the foundation is crucial.

In some respects, it's the most important part of a structure. It's certainly not something to be tampered with. Leave it alone. It's there. It's in place. It's built the way it is for a reason.

So that's always our starting place. As we strive to learn more about God's will for us, we start with the Bible. What does the Bible say? Now, we'll talk about this more in a moment, but some people seem very determined to discover God's will through any means other than the Bible.

I've heard of Christians using Ouija boards to ask God's questions. To ask God questions. And I know some will argue that God has used all kinds of ways to communicate with His people in the past.

[17:36] He's spoken from heaven. He's spoken through animals. He's written on stone tablets. But we live in a different time. And the Bible acknowledges that we live in a different time.

The book of Hebrews begins long ago. At many times, and in many ways, God spoke to the fathers by the prophets. But in these last days, He has spoken to us by His Son.

Clearly something has changed in the way God is communicating to His people. Now, I believe God can communicate to us however He wants. He could talk to us through a burning bush.

He could write a message on a wall. He could convey His message through a fleece on the ground. But those would certainly be unusual cases. Those would not be ordinary events.

In fact, they weren't ordinary even in the Old Testament. We know all of those stories and they might seem like, well, this just happened every day to people all over the place. But all things considered, God used extraordinary means in a relatively few cases with relatively few people throughout history as far as we know.

[18:52] And let me add something to that. If someone believes God has spoken to them through some kind of extraordinary means and what He has said contradicts the Bible, I don't know who's speaking to them, but it's not God.

God will not contradict Himself. He cannot contradict Himself. Whatever they heard did not come from God. Now, obviously, we don't have time to explore everything God's revealed will tells us. The Bible, after all, is a pretty big book. But I do want to look at a couple of passages that give us pretty good insight into what this will of God is all about. The first is in 1 Thessalonians 5.

You're welcome to go there with me. 1 Thessalonians 5. And I'll begin reading at verse 12.

Verse 12. We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work.

[20:15] Be at peace among yourselves. And we urge you, brothers, admonish the idle, encourage the faint-hearted, help the weak, be patient with them all. See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the spirit, do not despise prophecies, but test everything. Hold fast what is good, abstain from every form of evil. Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

He who calls you is faithful. He will surely do it. Now the Apostle Paul mentions several things that we should be doing here. It's not an exhaustive list, but it's a helpful one.

But I read this passage because he explicitly says, this is the will of God for you in Christ Jesus. If you've ever asked, what is God's will for me?

[21:30] Paul says, well, here it is. Again, it's not an exhaustive list, but it certainly points us in the right direction. Now it's not abundantly clear which parts of this Paul means fall into that will of God for us.

Is he referring only to giving thanks in all circumstances? Does he have the totality of this list in mind? I'm inclined to believe he's talking about all of this.

This is all part of God's will for us. And it's summarized very well in verse 23 when he says, now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely.

Everything here. Respecting our pastors, striving for peace, helping one another, doing good to everyone, rejoicing always, praying constantly, being thankful, abstaining from evil. Everything mentioned here is part of our ongoing sanctification. Which is the will of God. In fact, that's what Paul says in the previous chapter.

[22 : 37] Chapter 4, verse 3, for this is the will of God. Your sanctification. We talked about sanctification a couple of weeks ago.

God saved us to change us. He saved us to conform us to the image of his son. Here Paul says the God of peace is sanctifying us. He's changing us.

He's working to make us increasingly obedient, increasingly holy, increasingly more like his son, who is perfectly holy and perfectly obedient.

And you'll notice both wills of God at work are at work in our sanctification. There's the unseen, decreed will. It is God who is sanctifying us. He's working behind the scenes, if you will, to make us more holy because he decreed we would be holy.

Right? Ephesians 1, he chose us in him before the foundation of the world that we should be holy and blameless in love. The next verse says, in love he predestined us.

[23 : 44] Even before the world began, he decreed that we would be holy. At the same time, Paul here, he's encouraging these church to do these things willingly.

He's instructing them how to be holy, how to be sanctified. So there's a sense in which sanctification is the decreed will of God and another sense in which it is the revealed will of God. It's both. God decrees that his people will be holy and he commands us to be obedient to his revealed will which will make us increasingly holy.

So the Bible presents us with two views regarding God's will. We have his hidden decreed will and we have his revealed will. And again, Deuteronomy 29 tells us that one belongs to the Lord and the other belongs to us.

We can't know God's hidden will and we don't need to because he reveals what we need to know. He has given us what we need to know through Scripture. Now, what about that third category I mentioned before?

[24 : 57] You see, when we often talk about God's will, we talk about it as something that is pressing, it's needed for us, we really need to know it, but it's simultaneously hidden.

So let's say you're given a job offer. You already have a job and you can think of many reasons why you should stay at that job, but now you have this new job offer and you can think of many reasons why you should take it.

So, of course, you begin praying, Lord, what should I do? What is your will for me? Now, in most situations like this, you won't be able to consult your Bible to get a clear answer.

Unless maybe you're offered a job by the mafia to be a hitman, the Bible isn't going to give you a straight answer. If your job requires you to murder people or violate some other commandment of God, then yes, the Bible will be very explicit.

But if you're torn between, let's say, working as a financial advisor for company A or company B, the Bible's not really going to tell you what to do in this case.

[26 : 14] This is what Kevin DeYoung calls God's will of direction. God's will of direction. And in most cases, when someone asks, what is God's will for my life?

This is what they're looking for. What job should I take? What major should I pursue in college? Should I marry this man or woman? Should I stay here or maybe move to Denver?

You see, we have a sense that God has this purposeful direction for our lives. And maybe He's nudging us as we go. He has this beautifully satisfying future in mind.

The only problem is, we don't know what it is. It's hidden. So God's will of direction is like His decreed will in that it's hidden, but it also operates a bit like His revealed will.

If we don't follow it, we'll probably be in trouble. You know, at the very least, we won't be very satisfied. We may even be miserable. It's kind of like this.

[27 : 21] It's kind of like God holding out two choices in His hands. He says, in one hand, I have this great, satisfying joy for you. But in the other hand, I have dissatisfaction and misery.

Now, let me take these, put them behind my back, mix them up, and I'm going to let you choose.

This is how we often perceive or at least act like God's will, like this is God's will for us.

We know He has this will for us, right? We know it's meaningful, but we don't know what it is. So we scramble to figure it out. We pray about it.

We look for signs. We ask for God to give us peace in making a decision. In some cases, we may not do anything at all because we're so crippled by fear.

We're afraid to make the wrong decision. The truly spiritual among us, and I use spiritual in quotes, may disregard every logical consideration when making a decision because either they feel or they expect to feel God call them in one direction or another.

[28 : 40] Maybe He'll speak to them from heaven. Regardless, they're waiting for a clear answer that says, this is the will of God. Is this a legitimate third category for God's will?

I believe the answer is no. In most cases, I believe the answer is no. Now, I say in most cases because we do see exceptions in Scripture, don't we? And some people are quick to point that out. They say, look, God told the apostles where to go. He told them what to do. He spoke to them in dreams and in other ways. And yes, He did. But there were also many times when He didn't. We often see Paul, for instance, seemingly deciding for himself what to do next. Now, it didn't always work out that way, but he made many decisions without waiting for a sign from heaven. For example, he tells the Romans that he intends to go to Spain to preach the gospel. He didn't make it to Spain. He didn't make it any farther than Rome. There's an interesting example in Acts chapter 16. I'll read it.

[29 : 49] This is Acts 16.5. And they, that is Paul and his ministry companions, went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia.

And when they had come up to Mycenae, they attempted to go to Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. So passing by Mycenae, they went down to Troas. And the story goes on from there.

Here, Paul knows what his mission is. He's supposed to preach the gospel to the Gentiles. So, he sets off in one direction, but the Spirit stops him.

So he sets off in another direction, and the Spirit stops him again. He's clearly not waiting for some sign from heaven. He's not waiting from some indication from God that says, this is the place you ought to go.

He's going. He's doing what he knows he's supposed to be doing, and yet, God has this way of steering him in the right direction, even though Paul doesn't know what that direction is.

[30 : 55] Now, we may ask, how did the Spirit stop him? Well, I've thought about this, and I don't have an answer. We really don't know, but it could have been something remarkably simple.

Maybe a bridge was out, so they couldn't cross. Maybe Paul sees a Roman army in the distance and says, you know what, guys? I don't think we should go that direction.

Let's go this way. Maybe God gave Paul a strong feeling about it. Maybe God spoke to him. I don't know. But Paul didn't wait to find out. He just went.

He simply obeyed the Lord's command to preach the gospel in whatever way he saw fit. Only then did God intervene and give him more precise direction.

I think this third category, this God's will of direction, is a fairly modern Western idea. It's very commonplace today.

[31 : 53] But I don't remember reading much about it in the writings and sermons of church figures in the past. I don't really see it in the Bible. I wonder whether it's the result of us having such prosperous lives.

You see, I've come to notice that prosperity creates problems that don't actually exist. Have you ever heard the expression first world problems? You know, when I read the news sometimes, do you want to know why middle class college kids are throwing cans of soup on artwork?

do you want to know why people are confused about something as simple and straightforward as their biology? Do you want to know why people are protesting injustices that don't actually exist?

Well, there's many answers we can give to those questions, but I can't help but wonder whether part of the problem is sheer boredom. Life has gotten so easy for us and we have so much time on our hands that we just create new problems out of thin air.

That's a theory anyway. But I think it's true that our prosperity has led us to believe we can enjoy something close to heaven on earth.

[33 : 12] Right? You know, we're almost there. Our lives are so comfortable. We enjoy untold luxuries. Maybe, just maybe, the next job we take or the next move we make will lead us right into God's paradise assuming it's God's will for us.

Assuming we make the right decision in those moments. But that's pretty far from how the Bible teaches us to think, isn't it? The Bible says we're pilgrims in this world. We're not living for this world. Consider what Jesus says in Matthew 6. In his sermon on the mount, he says, Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air. They neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you, by being anxious, can add a single hour to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? [34 : 32] Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow. They neither toil nor spin. Yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is alive and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?

Therefore do not be anxious, saying, what shall we eat or what shall we drink or what shall we wear? For the Gentiles seek after all these things and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all.

But, seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added to you. Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness.

That's it. That's the secret to following Christ in this world. Yes, God has a plan for us. And that plan unfolds day after day, minute after minute.

We don't need to know His hidden will. We simply need to read and to study His revealed will. And if we strive to obey His revealed will, everything else just kind of falls into place.

[35 : 52] You can take job A or job B. It doesn't ultimately matter. Perhaps you make a poor decision. It won't ultimately matter.

First of all, you're not violating God's will by taking the worst of the two. Second, walking by faith never guarantees health or wealth or prosperity or anything else we seek in this life.

And third, you can glorify God at company A or company B. Either one.

Briefly, let me comment on Romans 12.2. Paul says again, do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is perfect, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

If there's a secret to making decisions or seeking guidance when confronted with a big decision, here it is. the more we learn about God's revealed will, the more our minds will be renewed, as Paul says.

[37 : 10] Our minds will be shaped by the will of God. In another place, Paul says, we have the mind of Christ. The more our thoughts are conformed to what God has revealed for us, the easier it is to discern what is the will of God.

what is good, what is acceptable, what is perfect. In short, the more we learn about God, the more we learn about His Son, the more we learn of His commandments and His Word and His revealed will for us, the more we grow in wisdom.

And as we grow in wisdom, the decisions we have to make in this life, they get easier. They get easier either because we find it easier to detect to apply wisdom and know which path is right or it's easier because we realize either path can be right.

Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and everything else will fall into place. If God's glory is your sincere desire in whatever you do, you really don't have to worry about making a so-called wrong decision when the Bible doesn't give you explicit commands one way or the other. If you are always striving to glorify God in everything you do, you really can't go wrong. Let's pray.

[38 : 48] Father, Father, we understand that you have a great and glorious will for each of us.

Some of it has been revealed. Some of it has not. But Lord, that's why we put our faith in you. We trust you with our lives because we don't know everything that will come to pass.

We don't know everything you intend for us, but we know that whatever comes our way, it is all meant for our good and ultimately your glory. But we also thank you because you have revealed much of your will to us, what we need to know, everything that pertains to life and godliness.

It's right here in your word and it's one of the most precious things we could possibly have, Lord. But we ask that you would help us in understanding it.

Help us as we study it. Help us as we learn from it. And help us as we seek to apply it. Some things are not always clear to us, Lord.

[40 : 01] And we don't necessarily need a sign, but we certainly need wisdom. And I pray that you would give us that wisdom. And you would give us peace in knowing that whatever comes our way, no matter if we make decisions that seem less than ideal, that we can still glorify you in all things.

I pray we will. And we thank you. We ask for your forgiveness in many of the ways that we have not trusted you. And I pray in Christ's name.

Amen. Amen.