

Watch Your *Life*

Session 6: Discerning God's Will Pastor Colin Smith

If you are confused about the will of God, you are not alone. One reason why many Christians find this confusing is that we speak of God's will in three different ways.

A. God's Secret Will

The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law. (Deuteronomy 29:29)

Notice the important distinction that is made here between what is secret and what is revealed. What is revealed belongs to us and we must do it, but what is secret belongs to God, and we cannot know it. What is God's secret will? The Bible speaks about "*the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will*" (Ephesians 1:11). Everything that happens is woven into the purpose of God. And nothing that happens is outside of His will. God works *all things according to the counsel of His will.*

Now, exactly how the events of our lives are woven into the Father's plan we cannot tell. These things are secret. They are a mystery to us and we often find ourselves asking *Why? Why did you allow this in my life, Lord? Why did you save her and not him? What are you doing through this illness? What good can possibly come from this?* These are all questions about God's secret will. And the secret things belong to the Lord.

How should we respond to God's secret will? We must trust God in what He has kept secret. But not everything is secret. This verse also speaks about ...

B. God's Revealed Will

The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.
(Deuteronomy 29:29)

God's revealed will is found in Scripture. It is God's will that we love the Lord with all our hearts, and that we love our neighbors as ourselves (Mark 12:29–31). It is God's will that we go and make disciples of all nations (Matthew 28:19).

The will of God is laid out for us in the Ten Commandments: God's will is that we should be content. God's will is that we should tell the truth. God's will is that we should have no other gods before Him.

There is a marvelous snapshot of God's will in 1 Thessalonians 5. "*Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you*" (1 Thessalonians 5:16–18)

Now of course God's revealed will is not limited to verses that use the words 'God's will.' We are to

believe all God's promises. We are to obey all God's commands. God's revealed will should always be our first concern. And here's some good news: God will hold us accountable for what He has revealed, not for what He has kept secret.

If you have been worried that you might have missed God's will because of a bad decision in your life, this should come as an enormous relief to you. On the last day God is not going to say to you, "You went and lived in Alabama when you should have gone to Michigan." God has not revealed whether you should live in Alabama, Michigan, Illinois, or anywhere else. But He will hold you accountable for **how** you lived in Alabama, Michigan or Illinois or wherever you may be.

So, when you find yourself saying, "I just need to find God's will," remind yourself, "God's will is that I should live as He has described in the Bible." And for the rest, make the wisest and most informed decisions you can.

How should we respond to God's revealed will? God calls us to walk in obedience to His revealed will.

C. God's Discerned Will

*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. (Romans 12:2)*

So, there is a will of God that can be discerned. This is neither secret nor revealed, but somewhere in between. It is discerned. All of us make life-changing decisions on issues where God has not given us a direct revelation in Scripture. What college should I attend? Where should I live? Should I marry and if so, who should I marry? What work should I pursue? What money should I spend, what should I save, and what should I give? What church should I join? What responsibilities should I take on? What should I decline?

When you have to make a decision, and there is no verse in the Bible that gives you clear direction, your calling is to discern.

You must seek the path of wisdom. Notice that we are to discern by **testing**. It is important to distinguish the three spheres of God's will because we are called to respond to each of them in a distinct and different way. We **cannot** test what God has kept secret. We **must not** test what God has revealed.

We do not come to what God has revealed in Scripture and say, "Well let's test this: What do other people think? Where does this fit with my experience?" We open the Bible to see what God has revealed and then we rule out what God forbids, and we rule in what God commands.

When it comes to the will of God, we need faith in what God has kept secret, obedience in what God has revealed, and wisdom in what God calls us to discern. How do we test and discern the will of God in areas where there is no direct revelation in the Bible?

Seven Tests for Discerning God's Will

1. Experience

*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**.* (Romans 12:1-2)

The will of God is *perfect*. Literally it fits like a hand in a glove. The will of God is shaped to you. It is made to measure! So, look at your life. Ask how your experiences might open doors of opportunity and move in that direction.

a. What have you done that God has most obviously blessed?

What are you good at? What have you done that God has blessed? Where have wise people said, "You should do that more?"

My son David wanted to be a lawyer. He said this for many years. When he went to college, a wise professor told him, "Your word scores are good, but your number scores are better. You'd be wasting your gift if you didn't do something with numbers."

So, he majored in economics, and has never looked back since he made that decision. The principle was simple. He discerned the way of wisdom by looking at the gifts God had given him. It makes sense that what God has made you good at, He might intend you to do! So, what has God made you good at?

b. What have you endured that may open doors for you to minister to others?

God never wastes anything. Especially the hard experiences of your life.

*God... comforts us in all our affliction, **so that we may be able to comfort** those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God.* (2 Corinthians 1:3-4)

Some years ago, I got to know a young lad in the church I was serving in London. He had been raised in a difficult home. His mother was an alcoholic and was barely able to care for her family. So, her teenage son filled the gap, and looked after his mother and his sisters.

He had come to faith in Christ, and after school, he decided to go to Bible College. I would meet with him when he came home and at Christmas in his second year, he said to me, "I've always thought that my background would limit my ministry, but I've seen that my background might be what makes my ministry possible."

He went on to do marvelous work helping people who are addicted to drugs. The hardest things in his life positioned him to be effective in the work God very clearly called him to do. What have you endured that might open a door for ministry to others?

2. Need

What need has God brought to your attention?

And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them. (Acts 16:9-10)

Notice how Paul discerned God's will. He *concluded* that he should go to Macedonia because the need of this area had been brought to his attention.

We need to be careful here because you cannot fill every need that comes to your attention. The significance of the vision is that *God* brought this to his attention. It doesn't need to be through a vision. It could be through an announcement that grabs your heart. It could be through a friend who tells you about a need. What part of the world, what community of people has God pressed upon your heart?

If you are looking at something you might do, ask yourself: Is there a real need here, and if so, is this a need that I could meet? Does it fit with what God has given to me?

3. Opportunity

Where do you see opportunity?

I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries. (1 Corinthians 16:8-9)

Notice how Paul reached the conclusion that it was right for him to stay at Ephesus. He discerned that this was pleasing to God because the door of opportunity was wide open. Why walk away from opportunity?

Where has God opened a door of opportunity for you? It may not be where you thought. You may say – well I never pictured myself being there or doing that. It is important to be flexible. Where is there opportunity?

Karen and I have spent our entire married lives in two places: London and Chicago. Why? How did we discern that this was where the Lord wanted us to be? There was a church in London, and later a church in the suburbs of Chicago that needed a pastor and opened a door of opportunity for me.

Where is there opportunity for you? That's an important question in discerning the will of God. One more thing. Paul says, "*I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries*" (1 Corinthians 16:8-9). So don't imagine that difficulties mean that you are out of the will of God. Obedience to Jesus led the disciples to get into a boat and that got them into a storm!

How do you discern the will of God? What tests should you apply to find the path of wisdom in areas where there is no direct revelation in Scripture?

4. Circumstances

What other factors should you consider before making a decision?

When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, even though a door was opened for me in the Lord, my spirit was not at rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I took leave of them and went on to Macedonia. (2 Corinthians 2:12-13)

Here again, Paul tells us about how he made a decision. A door of opportunity opened for him at Troas. But there was another factor in play. Paul's spirit was not at rest on account of Titus. So the open door was not everything.

It seems that Paul expected to find Titus in Troas, and when that didn't happen, he was concerned for Titus. There was an open door, but these circumstances re-shaped his plan. What factors in your life relate to the decision you are about to make? Needs of parents or of children. Issues of health or of finances.

The small church in the country town where my mother lives has an American pastor. He and his wife had been serving in South Africa, but he had some health issues and the doctor told him, "You need to find some place that has a year-round wet and damp climate." He discerned that the Lord was leading him to Scotland!

God makes our paths straight. He is the God of order, not of confusion. Everything in your life has its place. You will have joy in seeing how God brings the pieces together. How do you discern what God wants you to do? You discern by testing. And here's how you do that.

5. Counsel

Who has spoken into your life and what have they encouraged you to do?

The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice.
(Proverbs 12:15)

Without counsel plans fail, but with many advisers they succeed. (Proverbs 15:22)

Listen to advice and accept instruction, that you may gain wisdom in the future.
(Proverbs 19:20)

There was only one occasion when I ever seriously considered leaving the church I serve in Chicago. I had been invited by another church where there was a need and there certainly was an opportunity. It seemed that the circumstances at the time might indicate it would be a good time for a move. But I chose to stay and looking back I am very thankful that I did.

Why did I make that decision? In large measure because of four trusted friends who spoke honestly and directly into my life. They all said the same thing: "Moving would be a big mistake. Get on with what God has already called you to do." Discernment is a team game. Don't try to discern in isolation.

6. Desire

What are the inclinations of your heart?

Then I arose in the night, I and a few men with me. And I told no one what my God had put into my heart to do for Jerusalem. (Nehemiah 2:12)

Then my God put it into my heart to assemble the nobles and the officials and the people to be enrolled by genealogy. (Nehemiah 7:5)

But thanks be to God, who put into the heart of Titus the same earnest care I have for you. (2 Corinthians 8:16)

Remember that this is one of the ways that we test and discern. Our hearts can deceive us, and the desire of your heart is not the only test. God puts good things into the hearts of his people and it is wise and right to weigh the desires of your heart.

Factor in the other tests as well, but ask this question: What would you most like to do? What is your heart most drawn to?

7. Gifts

What gifts has God trusted to you?

...fan into flame the gift of God which is in you... (2 Timothy 1:6)

What He has given, He intended to be used. Identifying your gifts will help you to test and discern God's will. There is a sample list of gifts in Romans 12:

a. Prophecy (v6)

A special ability to speak the truth with insight and relevance. Some people have a special gift in this area, and God uses them to bring light and truth into people's lives.

b. Serving (v7)

A special ability to get things done. If you find yourself saying "I can do that," you probably have the gift of serving.

c. Teaching (v7)

A special ability to help others to grow in knowledge, character, and skills. One of the marks of people who have this gift is that they often have a special affection for younger people and find joy in seeing others flourish.

d. Encouraging/Exhortation (v8)

A special ability to bring strength and comfort to others. If you have this gift you will be especially sensitive to people who are lonely. Your instinct will be to offer friendship and hospitality.

e. Generosity (v8)

A special ability to release what God has given. You know that you have this gift if you have a vision for using what God has trusted to you for the advance of His kingdom.

f. Leading (v8)

A special ability to blaze a trail that others will follow. Leaders set direction. Leaders take the initiative. If you are a leader, you see possibilities where other people only see problems.

g. Mercy (v8)

A special ability to help those who are powerless. You know you have this gift if, like the Good Samaritan, you have empathy towards people in need and a desire to do something about it.

God gives gifts to all His people. Identifying your gifts will help you to discern what God wants you to do.

Summary

So, here's what we've learned. We can speak of God's will in three ways: God's secret will, God's revealed will, and God's discerned will. We need faith in what God has kept secret, obedience in what God has revealed, and wisdom in what God calls us to discern. We discern by testing, and we have looked at seven ways you can do that: experience, need, opportunity, circumstances, counsel, desire, and gifts.

*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. (Romans 12:2)*

May God give you wisdom as you use these tests to discern His will.

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