

KNOWING GOD'S WILL

It is critical that we know what God's will is for any meaningful decision of life (job, home, marriage, etc.). Simply having a "sense of peace" about some decision is insufficient. Our subjective peace is influenced by our fallen nature, which can easily rationalize a given decision to produce a sense of peace and convince us that the decision we made was God's will. Jeremiah 17:9 states that "the heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick." In Hebrew, the word for heart is *lēb* (labe), which is not merely the heart, but the will, intellect, motives, feelings, and affections. In other words, our will, intellect, motives, feelings, and affections are deceitful and sick and cannot be trusted because of our sinful nature.

This handout describes two approaches to knowing what God's will is for a particular decision. One approach is more theological in nature, while the other is more practical. The theological approach is from John MacArthur's book "Found: God's Will." The practical approach is from Charles Stanley's book "Handbook of Christian Living."

Theological Approach:

The theological approach to knowing whether something is God's will requires that the we are: (1) saved; (2) filled with the Spirit; (3) morally pure; (4) submitted to those in authority over him or her (God, government, church leaders); and, (5) prepared to suffer for Christ. If these criteria are each present in us, then we can do whatever we want because what we want will be in conformity with God's will.

First, salvation is a prerequisite for being within God's will. God's will is for "all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." (1 Timothy 2:4). If we are not saved, we are not within God's will, and we would have no reason to believe that any decision we make would be within God's will. Those who are saved will follow God's will because they are led by their Shepherd and recognize the voice of their Shepherd. (John 10:4). Contrary to the "natural man," we who are saved "have the mind of Christ," and know what His will is for us. (1 Corinthians 2:14-16). Thus, in order to have the mind of Christ such that we know what His will is, as well as having the ability to follow our Shepherd (and thus, to know and do His will), we must be saved.

Second, being filled with the Spirit is a condition for knowing whether or not something is within God's will. We are commanded to understand what God's will is, and to be filled with the Spirit. (Ephesians 5:17-18). Being filled with the Spirit is akin to letting "the word of Christ dwell richly within us." Notably, the command in Ephesians 5:18 to "be filled with the Spirit" is properly translated, based on the tense of the Greek verb, *pleroō*, "be being kept continuously filled with the Spirit." It is a command to believers to constantly and continuously on a moment-by-moment basis to be filled with the Spirit. The best way to understand the command to be filled with the Spirit is to look to Colossians 3:16, which states "[l]et the word of Christ richly dwell within you." The command to "be filled with the Spirit" and to "let the word of Christ richly dwell within you" are two sides of the same coin, as evidenced by the substantially similar results of each as set forth in Ephesians 5:18-6:9 and Colossians 3:16-25. In other words, to "be filled with the Spirit" is to continuously know, yield to, submit to, obey, and do the Word of

God. And, this is the continuing duty of all believers at all stages of their lives. Believers who are filled with the Spirit can be said to “walk by the Spirit” (Galatians 5:16), and in doing so, they receive the “fruit of the Spirit,” one of which is peace. (Galatians 5:22-23). So, to have true peace over a decision because we know it is God’s will, we must be filled with the Spirit – that is, completely filled with, and submitted to, His Word.

Third, to know that we are within God’s will, we must be pure. If we are not keeping God’s will, how can we expect God to show us His will. First Thessalonians 4:3-7 states: “For this is the will of God, your sanctification; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; and that no man transgress and defraud his brother … For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification.” There are four very clear commands here: (1) that we abstain from sexual immorality (v. 3); (2) that we control our bodies to make sure that we use them and dress them in a way that honors God (v. 4); (3) that we subdue our passions and refrain from acting in a godless manner (v. 5); and, (4) that we treat others fairly and honestly (v. 6). The overarching principle is stated in verse 7 – that God has not called us to impurity, but sanctification and growth in Christ-likeness. Here, the principle is clear, if we are living within God’s revealed will in all areas of our lives, we can be confident that the decisions we make are also within God’s will.

Fourth, another aspect of knowing whether or not decisions we make are within God’s will involves whether or nor we are submitted – submitted to God, to government, to church leaders, and to employers. We are commanded to submit to the Lordship of Christ (Matthew 17:5; John 3:36; Romans 14:9); we are commanded to submit to government authorities (Titus 3:1; 1 Peter 2:13-15); we are commanded to submit to church leaders (Hebrews 13:17); and we are commanded to submit to our bosses (Titus 2:9; 1 Peter 2:18). God calls us to submit to authorities and employers, in particular, so that we stand out in the world, so that we can reach the world, and so that we can be salt and light in the world. (Matthew 5:13-16). If our lives do not demonstrate a pattern of submissiveness, there is a significant likelihood that we will not be submitted to God in matters of personal decisions such as the choice of a career. Therefore, in order to have confidence that a decision we make is within God’s will, our lives should be models of submissiveness.

Fifth, the final aspect of the “theological” approach to determining whether we are within God’s will in a particular decision is to make sure that we are prepared to suffer for Christ. We are called to suffer for Christ. (Matthew 5:10-11 – “Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me.”; 1 Peter 3:17 – “it is better, if God should will it so, that you suffer for doing what is right rather than for doing what is wrong”; see also, 1 Peter 4:12-19; 1 Peter 5:10). If we are unwilling to suffer for Christ, we are in sin and have no reason to believe that anything we decide will be within the will of God. In other words, if we decide against a particular option (a certain job, for instance) because it will involve suffering for Christ, we can be assured that such a decision is not within God’s will. We must be willing to suffer for Christ, and being so will give us confidence that the decisions we make are within God’s will.

Now, if points one through five are operative in our lives, we can do whatever we want because we know that our decisions are rooted and grounded in God's Word and that whatever we choose to do will be within God's will, as well, including the choice of a career or the like. We are "to present our bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is [our] spiritual service of worship." (Romans 12:1). We are also commanded to "not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of [our] mind[s], so that [we] may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect." (Romans 12:2). In other words, our very decisions and actions are to be holy acts of worship to God. We are commanded to be transformed by the renewing of our minds (by being filled with the Spirit and letting the word of Christ richly dwell within us). If we are diligent in doing these things, our minds, hearts, and lives will be transformed and the actions that we want to take (whether it be who to marry or a job to take) will reflect our transformation and conformity to Christ's image. This is the crux of the "theological" approach to knowing God's will. If we are saved, and attend to our being filled with the Spirit, abiding in the Word, living a submitted life, and being prepared to suffer, our decisions will be within the will of God.

It would be incongruous for a saved, Spirit-filled, sanctified, submitted, prepared-to-suffer for Christ person to all of a sudden completely depart from such a lifestyle and make a decision to become a bookie, a professional gambler, a prostitute, or the like. It just would not make sense. If such a person were to make such a crazy decision, it would call into question whether any of points one through five were operative in his or her life. So, if we are saved, Spirit-filled, sanctified, submitted, prepared-to-suffer for Christ people, we can be confident that the choices we make will be God-honoring choices that will produce peace within us.

Practical Approach:

The practical approach to knowing whether something is God's will requires that we examine: (1) whether the path we desire to take is consistent with God's moral will; (2) whether it is consistent with the principles in God's word (such as the law of sowing and reaping); and, (3) whether or not taking the path we desire would be wise considering the present circumstances of our lives.

First, we can know if a decision we make is within God's will if it is consistent with the moral will of God – God's moral commands to us in Scripture. God's moral will is revealed throughout the Bible, and it is not a difficult matter to determine whether a decision is within God's moral will. (See e.g., Exodus 20:3-17; Matthew 5:3-12; Ephesians 4:17-5:12; Colossians 3:5-14).

John 14:21 states that "He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me; and he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and will disclose Myself to him." In other words, we show our love for Christ by keeping His commandments, and if we are obedient, the Father and Christ will love us, and Christ will reveal Themselves to us. As it pertains to knowing God's will, how could a loving God who has revealed Himself to us lead into something that contradicts His commandments that we are commanded to obey? He cannot. From our viewpoint, how could we believe that something would be God's will if it contradicts His commandments to us? That simply would not make

sense. God wants to have an intimate relationship with us, and our side of that intimacy requires obedience. So, we will have a difficult time discerning His will for us if we neglect His moral will. For example, if a Christian were trained as a doctor, and is striving to obey God's moral will, he or she should not have any hesitation rejecting a job at a medical clinic that performs abortions. So, God's will for us will not include anything that conflicts with His moral will.

Second, God's will in a particular decision for us will be consistent with the principles in His Word. God's principles are not direct statements of His ~~moral~~ will, but are more like cause and effect rules. These principles are found, for example, in Proverbs 11:24 – “There is one who scatters, and yet increases all the more, and there is one who withholds what is justly due, and yet it results only in want.” The principle is that what we cling tightly to will diminish, and things that we scatter and give will be multiplied and returned.

Another principle is found in Galatians 6:8 – “the one who sows to his flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life.

While we are making decisions, God's principles will likely come to bear on our decision. It is imperative that we spend regular time in the Word of God so that these principles are in our minds and will be drawn out by the Spirit at the proper time so that they can direct our decisionmaking.

Third, we can know that something is God's will if it is a wise decision in view of the current circumstances in our lives. This is the particularly practical element of this approach. In Ephesians 5:15, we are commanded to “be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise.” Certainly, a wise thing to do before considering this prong of the test is to ask in faith for wisdom from God. (James 1:5-8). For every decision that we make, we need to consider whether it is a wise decision. To consider whether or not something is wise, we must consider our current circumstances in light of God's Word, and not just make decisions blindly based on self.

Conclusion:

We must submit our decisions in life to God's Word. There is not one way to do that, as shown in this handout. But, it is imperative that God's Word serve as the authority for our decisions in life. If we are able to use God's Word in this manner, our decisions will improve, we will act in a manner that is pleasing and glorifying to God, and we will have true peace over our decisions.