

## GOD'S PLAN & WILL

### “understanding what the will of the Lord is”

(see also #205, #307, #803)

#### Key question

How is a believer to make life decisions in following the Spirit of Christ?

#### Key text

### Ephesians 5:17

“So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.”

#### Key Definition

### God's Will

God's Will is His intention for His creation, of which there are parts declared, parts which are dynamic, and parts which are decreed.

#### Introduction:

1. What questions do the following Scriptures raise concerning God's will?
  - a. **Matt.18:14** “Thus **it is not the will of your Father** who is in heaven **that one of these little ones perish.**”
  - b. **I Thess.4:3** “For **this is the will of God, your sanctification**; that is, that you abstain from sexual immorality.”
  - c. **John 17:15** “I do not ask Thee to take them out of the world, but **to keep them from the evil one.**”
  - d. **Acts 4:27-28** “For truly in this city there were gathered together against Thy holy servant Jesus, whom Thou didst anoint, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do **whatever Thy hand and Thy purpose predestined to occur.**”
  - e. **Eph.5:17** “So then do not be foolish, but **understand what the will of the Lord is.**”
  - f. **II Pet.3:9** “The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, **not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.**” (I Cor.12:11 uses the same Greek word — “But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He **wills.**”)
  - g. **Lk.18:5** “yet because this widow bothers me, I will give her legal protection, **lest by continually coming she wear me out.**”
2. When we speak of God's plan, we also are dealing with the following topics:

- a. God's will
- b. Knowing God's will
- c. God's election to salvation
- d. Predestination and human volition

**A. It is important that we discern God's will because history has direction and purpose.**

1. History is not circular (Eastern religion) — life is a series of reincarnations, repeating itself.
2. History is not fatalistic (existentialism) — life is heading for a tragic end because humans have not been able to control it.
3. History is not idealistic (evolution) — life is evolving to higher levels of refinement.
4. History is not tied to dialectical materialism (Marxism) — life is evolving through class struggle over economic issues.
5. History is linear, going somewhere purposefully. God has a plan in which God's purposes will be ultimately and fully realized.

**B. In speaking of God's will there are four aspects that must be equally respected.**

1. **God's Will is Determined.** (Is.14:24; Acts 4:27-28; Rom.9:19)
  - a. Much of this aspect of God's will cannot be known by us until after the fact. (Prov.25:2; Is.55:8; Deut.29:29)
  - b. God's sovereignty is in one respect absolute and cannot be thwarted by man's carnal will.
2. **God's Will is Directive.** (Col.4:12; Rom.12:2; Eph.5:17; Is. 48:17; Psalms 32:8; 37:23; 73:24)
  - a. We will receive all of the revelation that is necessary to meet our responsibilities to God. (II Pet. 1:3-4)
  - b. Our problem is never one of not having revelation, but rather one of not responding positively to the revelation we have. (John 7:17; 9:31; Rom.12:1-2)
3. **God's Will is Dynamic.** (Rom.8:28, Lk.18:1-8)
  - a. Sin is never the will of God, but it can be worked into God's plan for good. (Gen. 50:19-20)
  - b. Man cannot thwart the decreed purpose of God, though he can disobey the directive will of God. (Acts 4:27-28)
  - c. God's directive and determined will may appear to be at odds in some instances (Matt.18:14; II Pet.3:9). It is at these points that the dynamic aspect of His will is realized.
  - d. Prayer does change things and God does "change" His plans in response to man's posture. (Gen.6:6-7; Ex.32:14; Judges 2:18; I Sam.15:11,29,35; II Sam.24:16; Jer.18:7-10; 26:3,13,19; 42:10; Amos 7:3,6; Jonah 3:9,10; 4:2)
4. **God's Will is Detailed.**
  - a. God sometimes reveals a specific life plan for an individual. (Isa.6:1-13, Jer.1:5)
  - b. It is often assumed that God has a detailed plan for everyone but there is no clear indication in Scripture that this is so.

NOTE: The two Greek words translated "will" may have slightly different nuances. THELO (θελω) = "desire", BOULOMAI (βουλομαι) = "design" **I Tim.2:4** "who desires (θελω) all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of he truth."

**C. We should be responsive to God's directive will in four areas of life.**

1. God's **moral-ethical plan**
    - a. Our **Inner Motivation** — Our *motives* and what we *think* are to be consistent with God's viewpoint. (I Cor.14:20)
    - b. Our **Outer Conduct** — What we *do* is to be consistent with the law of Christ. (I Cor.9:21; Gal. 6:2)
  2. God's **logistical plan**
    - a. The micro movements of life — **Space/Time Details** - When and where we do what we do.
    - b. The macro events of life — The **strategic movements** of history.
- D. We must be sensitive to the conditions for knowing God's Will.**
1. I must know Christ and be **indwelt by His Spirit**. (Rom.8:14; I Cor.2:14-16)
  2. I must be **walking in a manner worthy** of my calling (obeying what I know to be His will). (Rom.12:1-2; Eph.4:1-3)
  3. I must be **willing to obey** His will once I know it. (John 7:17)
  4. I am to **pray for wisdom** to discern His will. (James 1:5)
  5. **Spiritual maturity** will be a factor in my ability to detect God's leading in my life. (II Pet.3:18; Heb.5:14)
- E. Discerning God's directive will demands sensitivity to four issues.**
1. **The Scriptures**
    - a. **Mandates** (normative and universally applicable)
      1. Positive commands:
        - a. It is God's will that we give thanks in all things. (I Thess.5:18)
        - b. It is God's will that we suffer for righteousness sake. (I Pet.2:15; 3:17; 4:19)
      2. Negative commands:
        - a. We are not to break covenants. (Ps.15:4)
        - b. We are not to be unequally yoked with unbelievers. (II Cor.6:14)
    - b. **Principles** (applied by individuals in individual circumstances)
      1. The principle of Glory to God (I Cor.10:31; Rom.15:6)
      2. The principle of Liberty (I Cor.6:12; Gal.5:13)
      3. The principle of Expediency (I Cor.6:12)
        - a. In relation to self —
          - 1) Conscience (Rom.14:22-23)
          - 2) Control (I Cor.6:12)
        - b. In relation to others —
          - 1) Selflessness (I Cor.10:24; Phil.2:3)
          - 2) Love (I Cor.8:13; Rom.14:15)
          - 3) Not to cause a brother to stumble (I Cor.8:13)
          - 4) Not to cause an unbeliever to stumble (I Cor.10:27)
          - 5) Union (Rom.15:5-6; I Cor.1:10; II Cor.13:11; I Pet.3:8; Col.3:14; Eph.4:3)
    - c. **Examples:**
      1. Christ (Rom.8:29; I Pet.2:21; Jn.13:15)

2. Old Testament (I Cor.10:6; Jude 7; Jas.5:10)
3. Saints (I Pet.5:3; I Tim. 4:12; Phil.3:17; 4:9; I Cor.4:16)

## 2. **The indwelling Holy Spirit** (Jn.16:13; Acts 13:2)

### a. Historical **perspective**

1. The Old Testament saint sought God's will through physical, external means — laws, seers, prophets, direct revelation, etc. The fleece of Judges 6:37-40 and the lot of Acts 1:24-26 are examples.
2. With the coming of the Spirit of Pentecost, we see God replacing the external with an internal Spirit (Heb.8:10), who speaks from within man (Acts 13:2; 15:22,25,28).

### b. **Impressions**

1. God can speak to us through rather subjective convictions, desires, and attractions.
2. We must remember that Satan and our human nature can often be mistaken for the Spirit of God, and it is for this reason that impressions by themselves are suspect.

### c. **Spiritual Common Sense**

1. A renewed mind (Rom.12:1-2) is the most common voice of the Spirit. (I Cor.2:16)
2. Biblical "brainwashing" is prerequisite.
3. We are commanded to pray for wisdom (James 1:5), not revelation.

### d. **Peace** (Col.3:15; Phil.4:7; Rom. 8:6; Prov.3:17; Is.32:17)

1. The "peace of God" is an indication of a proper walk. It should be sought as a guide.
2. The convicting work of the Holy Spirit tells us what not to do, while God's peace tells us what to do.
3. We must be aware of the fact, however, that not all feelings of peace come from God, and often God's directive will be realized without a feeling of peace.

## 3. **The Body of Christ**

- a. The **consensus** of the local assembly is often the voice of God. (Acts 15:22,25,28)
- b. The **counsel** of mature believers is often wise. (Prov.11:14; 12:15; 13:10; 15:22)
- c. **Prophetic utterances** are not to be ignored, but they are to be examined and tested. (I Thess.5:19-21)

## 4. **Circumstances** (Acts 4:18-20; 5:28-29; 40-42; 6:1-6; 11:19)

## F. **Developing character and a sensitive conscience.**

1. Defining moments are decisions and experiences that give general direction to our lives and values.
  - a. The influence of moral models in our lives – a parent, a teacher, etc. set us up to make commitments that shape our character.
  - b. Defining moments often reveal or uncover subconscious values and drives in our lives.
  - c. Defining moments can test and confirm core values.
  - d. Trauma, success, failure, suffering, etc. are powerful opportunities and defining moments for most of us.
2. The confluence of personal identity, emotional peace, and outward behavior solidify our character.
  - a. A conscience that is trustworthy will be reinforced by a life that is integrated.

- b. Our identity “in Christ” as those who bear the “image of God” and are called to “serve the purposes of the Kingdom” is vital to our understanding of our goal in character formation.
- c. Coming to know who we are “in Christ” and as individual members of his body with unique gifts and callings is a process that is best served by:
  - 1. A secure home and childhood upbringing.
  - 2. A healthy Christian community where one can explore the use of their gifts and see and hear the Word of Grace.
  - 3. An understanding of one’s position in Christ through a study of God’s Word.
- 3. The challenge of objective perception of the truth is a process.
  - a. True ideas have three empirical characteristics
    - 1. They have value in experiential terms – they are profitable to our lives.
    - 2. They are consistent with what we already know to be true.
    - 3. They are down to earth not esoteric.
  - b. True ideas are shaped in us by the Holy Spirit working through the Scripture, the church, and an inner light.
    - 1. Our perceptions of the concrete world are influenced by esoteric and theoretical visions of truth.
    - 2. The community of the Holy Spirit is a powerful shaping tool in our concept of truth.

## HOW DO WE MAKE DECISIONS?

Key text

### Matthew 25:14-30

“14 For {it is} just like a man {about} to go on a journey, who called his own slaves, and entrusted his possessions to them. 15 And to one he gave five talents, to another, two, and to another, one, each according to his own ability; and he went on his journey. . . 24 And the one also who had received the one talent came up and said, ‘Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you scattered no {seed.} 25 And I was afraid, and went away and hid your talent in the ground; see, you have what is yours.’ 26 But his master answered and said to him, ‘You wicked, lazy slave, you knew that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I scattered no {seed.} 27 Then you ought to have put my money in the bank, and on my arrival I would have received my {money} back with interest. 28 Therefore take away the talent from him, and give it to the one who has the ten talents.’ 29 For to everyone who has shall {more} be given, and he shall have an abundance; but from the one who does not have, even what he does have shall be taken away. 30 And cast out the worthless slave into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

#### A. **Because our moral decisions are goal-oriented we need to critically assess our hopes.**

1. There are three driving forces in our lives that influence our decisions.
  - a. **Anger** - guilt or bitterness.
  - b. **Anxiety** - fear of what might happen.
  - c. **Agape** - selfless love for another.  
**NOTE:** Because we are fallen creatures and working from a deficit with respect to our experience of full life, we are too often moved by anger or anxiety.
2. We too often make decisions based upon what we think will bring us life (**significance, security, and serenity**).
  - a. We are generally **inconsistent** with our Christian confession in that we don't practice what we preach. ILL. *Jesus is Lord?*
  - b. We are generally **relativistic** in that we are swayed by the need of the moment. ILL. *Divorce*
  - c. We are generally **humanistic** in that we make decisions as though God doesn't really exist. ILL. *Science and miracles*
3. Our decisions are usually **logical**.
  - a. This logic is not always apparent because our true beliefs are often **unacknowledged**. ILL. *Anger can be a key indicator, tipping us off to our true beliefs.*
  - b. Our behavior is **goal-oriented**, trying to achieve something that is important to us.
4. Without a proper perception of three things we will make poor choices.
  - a. **Our longings.** Our deepest needs. The true desire of our heart.

1. **CASUAL LONGINGS** - for superficial things that bring cosmetic happiness - ILL. money, free time, good health.
2. **CRITICAL LONGINGS** - for significant relationships that make life rich and full - ILL. being loved by parents and family, being respected in the community, having close intimate friendships.
3. **CRUCIAL LONGINGS** - for life at the deepest level of my being - ILL. a sense of inner holiness and wholeness.

**NOTE:** The more mature we are, the less superficial will be our avenue of search for life. ILL. *Do I strive for a new car, a better job or God?*

b. **The only true source of life.**

1. My belief system sets my being in a direction as I search for life.
2. I learn many of my beliefs from my world environment. ILL. *Academic success is key to survival.*

c. **The dynamic of sin** in its foolish strategies and inadequate goals.

1. Sin is most basically - disbelief in God and His provision for life.
2. This disbelief sets my life in a direction to seek goals (in my search for life) in something other than an intimate relationship with God.
3. In seeking these goals I develop selfish destructive strategies that harm me and others. ILL. *Fame, fortune, fun.*

**B. Because our moral decisions are constrained by things other than our free volition we need to be sensitive as to how we judge others and ourselves.**

1. Morality requires free will, not just material determinism. *"The simplest proof that human will is free to choose is this: If you are not free to choose, then all our ordinary language about morality is totally meaningless."*
2. Constraints on our will.
  - a. The **SIN NATURE** - which is in bondage to foolishness. Gal.5:17
  - b. The **NURTURING ENVIRONMENT** - which is often teaching us foolishness.
  - c. The **DIVINE DECREE** - God's sovereign purpose. Acts 4:27-28
3. Recognizing the present limits of our horizons is necessary.
  - a. **Presuppositions** - our assumptions about how things are. ILL. *Secular humanism, Biblical, Eastern thought*
  - b. **Suppositions** - our observations of what is immediately before us. ILL. *death, pain, power*
  - c. **Predispositions** - our temperament -1. **SJ** (law, order and discipline) 2. **SP** (freedom and generosity) 3. **NF** (harmonious relationships) 4. **NT** (unified understanding)
  - d. **Dispositions** - our mood at the moment. ILL. *hurt, joy, love*
4. We are not the only people responsible for some of the issues in our lives.
  - a. **In Matt.18:6** Jesus warns those who cause a little one to stumble.
  - b. **Rom.14:13-23** suggests that someone can cause me to stumble by their example. (See I Cor.10:32 also.)
  - c. **I Jn.2:10** speaks of a cause for stumbling that is in those who do not walk in the light.
  - d. In **Matt.26:31** we read that when the shepherd is struck the sheep flee as a result.
  - e. **Gal.5:17** indicates that because of internal tensions between the flesh and the spirit we can not do as we please.

- f. The sins of fathers often bring an effect on sons. **Ex.20:5**; 34:6-7; Lev.26:39-40; Jer.32:18

**C. In Matthew 25:14-30 (a parable of stewardship and decision making) we are encouraged to use creativity & common sense in making decisions.**

1. The first two slaves represent a positive example:
  - a. They knew that their master expected them to do something constructive with the resources he gave them.
  - b. They took risks.
  - c. They did not have specific details as to what decisions to make.
  - d. They were successful in making decisions with their own creativity.
  - e. They were commended by the master.
  - f. They were given more responsibility.
2. The third slave is a negative example:
  - a. He was paralyzed by fear of not doing the right thing for the master.
  - b. He was conservative and took no risks.
  - c. He was labeled as wicked and lazy by the master.
  - d. He lost the little that he had.
3. Following God's will may involve exercising creative risks in making decisions without specific leading on every detail or element. His leading may be more like a compass than a road map.

**D. In I Corinthians 7 Paul addresses one of the most common questions with respect to "God's will" – Should I marry and whom should I marry?**

1. It is significant that Paul suggests that "what was good" in Gen.2:18 is not necessarily mandated in Corinth. (vs.1 "it is good for a man not to touch a woman.")
2. Circumstances can influence a decision. (vs.2 "But because of immoralities")
3. Paul's words come not as a command but a concession. (vs.6 "But this I say by way of concession, not of command.")
4. Paul "wishes" (vs.7) that others remain single but he does not instruct them to do so because he realizes they should have freedom in such decisions.
5. In verse 28 Paul says "But if you should marry, you have not sinned, . . . Yet such will have trouble in this life, and I am trying to spare you." Again, Paul is giving advice but respecting a range of decisions.
6. In verse 39 Paul gives the only clear boundary. "A wife is bound as long as her husband lives; but if her husband is dead, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord." The phrase "in the Lord" is synonymous with "a believer."

## Pastoral advice

**What advice should be given to those who are seeking to know God's mind on an issue?**

1. Learn from Matt. 25 that creative risks in choices is expected. We will not always be told exactly what to do.
2. Align your values with the values of God's kingdom.



3. Seek the advice of people who are more experienced and wise.
4. Avoid formulaic and mechanical mechanisms for making decisions.
5. Let your heart make close calls after your mind has weeded out worldly thinking.

### **Questions that you should be able to answer.**

#### **1. Specific facts you should know.**

- a. Where does the Bible make reference to the will of God?
- b. What Biblical evidence is there supporting the dynamic aspect of God's will?
- c. What are some of the factors that influence our decision making?
- d. What is the difference between casual, critical, and crucial longings?

#### **2. Issues that you should be able to discuss.**

- a. How is Matt.25:14-30 significant in a discussion of God's will?
- b. If God's will is in one sense determined, how can we be judged as ethically responsible for our actions?
- c. What do we mean when we say that our decisions are goal oriented?
- d. Does Scripture support the idea that I am fully responsible for my actions?

#### **3. Questions you should wrestle with.**

- a. How does our modern western concept of individualism influence our sense of God's sovereignty and our autonomy?
- b. How does our understanding of "time" relate to our understanding of God's will?