

## Knowing and Doing God's Will

**James 4:13-17**

**Romans 12:1-2**

One of the most frequently asked questions I have heard over the years (and have asked the question myself): How do I know what God's will is for my life? (or for anything, for that matter?) Related to that: How do I know if or when I've heard from God? Or, does God even speak, or give specific direction to a person's life? This morning, we'll venture into those questions.

### **Romans 12:1-2**

**12**I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. <sup>2</sup>Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

This is the word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God!**

I'd like to begin with a prayer by Thomas Merton. This may sound familiar, since it's become widely used and beloved, and we have used it in worship a couple times. Listen to this in the context of seeking to know God's will:

"My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. But I believe that the *desire* to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am

doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road, though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always, though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.” Isn’t that wonderful? I’ll touch on this prayer as we go along.

This morning we are reflecting on the main question: what is God’s will and how do I know it? We pray every Sunday—some pray every day: “Your Kingdom come, *your will be done*, on earth as it is in heaven.” What does that mean? How do we know what God’s will is in certain situations: Should I change jobs? Should I stay in my home or should I move/downsize? Should I volunteer my time somewhere, or, cut back on my involvements? I have money I can do something with and need direction about it. Or, I don’t have enough money and need direction about making changes or getting help in order to live an adequate life. Generally, is there something God wants me to do and am I missing it?

Even if you’re not faced with a decision or some circumstance that is keeping you up at night, sometimes we just want to hear from God, don’t we? Sometimes we may feel like we’re wandering, or lost, or lonely, like Thomas

Merton, and we just want to hear from God, and know God is with us, giving us some direction. Anything!

When we talk about the will of God, it's so simple, yet so complex. Simple as Jesus telling us to love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself—the great commandments. Just do that, Jesus says. Simple, right?

Yet it's not always that simple. There are certain situations and circumstances where we need to ask: What does God require of me? Does God have a specific direction he wants me to go? Is there a specific choice that he wants me to make when faced with several choices? A deeper question, behind all of this is: how involved is God in directing the course of a person's life, or of circumstances, personal or collectively?

In attempting to answer these questions, those who have wrestled deeply with such things throughout the centuries have made the distinction between the *revealed* will of God, and the *mysterious*—or *hidden*—will of God.

The *revealed* will of God is clear: throughout Scripture and teachings of Jesus Christ there are instructions set forth that communicate God's will plainly and clearly. There is no mystery. For example, Jesus gave the two great commandments: love God, love neighbor. This is God's will. It's clear. The

apostle Paul writes to the churches (specifically in 1Thess 5:16-18—from our prayer this morning): “Be joyful always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances, for *this is God’s will for you* in Christ Jesus.” That’s clear. No mystery there. Micah 6:8—“God has shown you (lit., *revealed* to you—so here is the revealed will of God!) what is good, and what does the Lord requires of you? Do justice, love mercy, walk humbly with God.” This is clear, and God is telling us very directly what his will is. That’s what we mean by the ***revealed*** will of God.

Yet, God’s will is also ***hidden*** and ***mysterious***: there are certain times in our lives when we wonder if or how God is involved in choices we need to make. We ponder the future and are faced with important decisions and wonder if one path or one choice is God’s will, or God’s preference, over another. And we ask, what does God want me to do? Maybe it feels like this (first image), or like this (second image)—and we wonder if one way is right the another wrong.

Is God directly involved in decisions like this? Does God intervene? Just what are we praying when we pray, “Thy will be done” in *these* situations?

A good Biblical example that reflects both the ***revealed*** and ***hidden*** will of God is the Joseph story (Genesis 37-50). Joseph is a younger brother of Jacob’s many sons; he is given dreams of greatness and communicates those dreams to his brothers, who then sell him into slavery because they didn’t like what they

heard. Joseph ends up serving in Pharaoh's household, is betrayed by Pharaoh's wife and then is thrown in prison for a crime he didn't commit; is then released from prison because of his ability to interpret dreams and then gains favor and status in Pharaoh's government; then through strange and wonderful events is reunited with his father and brothers.

The writer of the story in Genesis tells us, "The Lord was with Joseph." But Joseph had no real proof that was true. In fact, many of the events of Joseph's life should have led him to believe that the Lord was *not* with him, or perhaps had abandoned him altogether.

But the writer knows the entire story, so he can say with confidence that the Lord was with Joseph. The writer's perspective manifests God's ***hidden*** or ***mysterious*** will; God's sovereign activity over time and history, which is something we get to see often only in retrospect, not in advance. Joseph, himself, recognizes it too *at the end of the story* as he speaks with his brothers and says, "*You intended to do harm to me, but God meant it for good.*"

God's ***hidden/mysterious*** will becomes clear to Joseph *at the end*. God doesn't reveal his life's plan to him in advance ("Here is what will happen in your life and here are the decisions I want you to make along the way"). Only *at the*

*end* does Joseph see that all things work together for good (as the apostle Paul says in Romans 8:28).

But *during* the story Joseph's perspective shows the ***revealed*** will of God. That is, Joseph—on a daily, moment-by-moment basis—chose to trust God, and follow what he knew to be right and true, and chose not to fret about what God's will *might be* in the future.

Joseph believed, in the *middle* of the story, that God was good and sovereign and that all things would work together for good at the *end* of the story. God's ***hidden*** will may not have been done if Joseph had not consented to God's ***revealed*** will day by day and moment by moment. God's ***revealed*** will for Joseph involved things like believing and trusting that God was with him and loved him, and doing good to those around him. Praying, delighting in God, trusting in God, even in the midst of terrible circumstances, and even if or when God felt completely absent to him.

And by the way, this is why I believe that Paul's instruction to "be joyful always, pray continually, and give thanks in all circumstances" isn't just good advice to help us feel better about what's going on around us, to cheer us up. Rather, gratitude, joy and prayer actually *help us see more clearly* what God is doing on a day to day, moment by moment basis, especially if things are tough.

Because if we can practice these we won't be overwhelmed by, or overly focused on, our circumstances. Rejoicing, prayer and gratitude help us center in on who God is, and on the presence of God in the present moments of our lives. Which, to use Paul's words from Romans, helps renew our minds so we have a better chance of discerning God's will.

Here's the point that I believe the Biblical writers are communicating to us: God's will for you and for me exists not primarily in the *future*, in a myriad of possible events. God's will for you and for me exists primarily in the *present moment* as we attend to those obvious things God wants us to do. Love God, love neighbor. Be kind and generous. Rejoice always, pray continually and give thanks in all circumstances. James affirms this, in his own salty style, but wise: we can't know everything about tomorrow or the future; do what you know is the right thing to do *today*.

This is why Jesus tells us in the sermon on the mount (at the end of that "do not worry..." discourse): "don't be anxious about tomorrow; tomorrow has enough worries of its own." Live for today, for the present moment. And see how God provides, and cares for all of creation: plants, animals, humans.

Jerry Sittser (retired Whitworth University professor): "*The will of God concerns the present moment, not some future choice. It has to do with what we*

*already know, not what we must figure out. It is contained in Jesus' command that we seek first God's kingdom and righteousness. As we look ahead, we see many good options for doing what we think may be the will of God. All of them could be the will of God, but only one becomes the will of God—the one we choose."*

Interesting perspective! What he is saying is, if we are doing our best to seek God's Kingdom, and if we are assured that the Lord loves us and is with us, then a choice we make *becomes* God's will for us after we make it. Make sense? That perspective might look something like this (3<sup>rd</sup> image).

Here's a good example:

A young couple I knew years ago was facing a decision to move to Seattle from the South (job offer at Boeing). Huge decision: it would mean moving away from their families and friends and church; their kids in early elementary school would experience a change; there is a change in culture from South to the Pacific Northwest. So they prayed, and sought first the Kingdom. They weighed all their options carefully, consulted friends and mentors, and after all was said and done, felt like they had no clear direction. After considering it a bit more, they finally decided to move here. Was that God's will for them? Yes! Now, what if, after their praying and discerning and seeking wisdom from friends and mentors they

had decided not to move here and stay in the South. Would that have been God's will for them? Yes! Because, the most important decision had already been made: the decision to seek first the Kingdom of God, trust God, and pray. They had already made the decision to honor God with their lives. So, God's *revealed* will was already being followed. This family was, in a way, following Thomas Merton's prayer: "We have no idea where we're going; but we believe our desire to please you, pleases you, and you will lead us by the right road even if we may know nothing about it; and we will not fear, because we know you are with us and will not leave us to face our perils alone." And God honored their desire to please him by blessing them with a new place to call home here, and new friends and a new school, and a new faith community where they can continue to live out their desire to do God's will and be supportive of others on that same journey. And, as a bonus, we have the best weather in the country! (As someone who recently moved here said, "We won the weather lottery")

Now, it needs to be said that while many (if not most) stories are like this, I have seen and heard many other stories where people had choices to make (similar to this one) and God made it clear that one path was to be chosen over the other. As the Quakers would say, one way became closed, and another way was made open. But that's the point: God will be clear when God needs to be

clear. The Holy Spirit will speak or nudge or move as we are listening and our eyes and ears and hearts are attuned to God speaking. Saints throughout the centuries have talked about “providential circumstances” where God will line up some puzzle pieces for us that give us clues as to the direction God wants us to go. Or, perhaps it’s a nudge in the moment—an aha moment, or a sense that we’re supposed to do something, or we hear that still small voice. And I’ve heard enough stories from some of you to know that you have experienced that nudge or have heard that voice that gave you some direction, even if in a small way.

God’s will isn’t always about some big decision for the future, but God’s will is, how did I treat my neighbor today? Or my family? How did I respond to the grocery store clerk? Did I help the person that needed help and it was within my power to act? How did I respond when something didn’t go my way, or after an unexpected turn of events? Did I enjoy and thank God for **today**, for the present moment?

Do the things you know to be true, which are clear. And trust God to speak to you when things aren’t as clear. And, if after prayer and seeking first the Kingdom, and getting wise input from trusted friends, if there isn’t a clear direction from God, then God is probably saying, “I am with you always... go forth in peace,; and whatever we choose to do then *becomes* God’s will for us. And if

we go astray, or become willful (“*my will be done!*”), we rely on God’s grace and forgiveness and lean on God’s mercy to set us on the right path and renew us.

As we come to the table this morning, we affirm that a central part of knowing God’s will—God’s *revealed* will—is knowing that we’re loved by God—that we are beloved children of God. There is no mystery to this! God is not a taskmaster who is simply to be obeyed or else. God is our father who loves us as children. This is the God who—as the psalms say—made our inmost being, who fashioned us carefully and lovingly, whose presence is intricately interwoven with our being.

So, God’s will is that we know that we’re loved and accepted by the God of the universe. To know that (in Paul’s words from Romans 8:38-9): “...neither death nor life, nor things present nor things to come, nor anything in all creation can separate us from God’s love in Christ Jesus.” So before we concern ourselves over decisions about the future, we can rest in God’s care today. And then respond with gratitude and praise and fresh desire to follow.

#771 What is the World Like