

Understanding God's Will

Psalm 67; Acts 16:9-15

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I went to a lot of chapel services when I was a student at Southern Seminary. Two or three times a week I would take a break from classes and study and walk to the Alumni Memorial Chapel. The great preachers and theologians of the day were invited to be chapel speakers, so I heard some inspiring and challenging messages. That was over a quarter of a century ago, and I have long forgotten most of those sermons. However, I still remember a sermon delivered by Dr. Richard Cunningham, the seminary's philosophy professor. His text was the man from Macedonia in Acts 16.

Dr. Cunningham approached this text as a call to missions. I think the reason I remember the sermon so distinctly is that I could picture in my mind this man from Macedonia standing on tiptoes and begging Paul for help: "Come over to Macedonia and help us." Dr. Cunningham repeated that plea several times during his sermon, "Come over to Macedonia and help us," urging all of us to be willing to go over to Macedonia, or wherever God called us.

A quarter century later the call to missions still rings true for me, but now I see something else in this text that intrigues me. It's how Paul and his travel companions made the decision to go to Macedonia rather than to their original destination. Today we call this understanding God's will. How do we know to go to Macedonia rather than to Bithynia? How do we make major decisions, like career choice or a life partner? And what about the anguishing decision, like whether to leave a spouse or end chemo treatments? How can thoughtful Christians make these kinds of decisions so that the teachings of our faith are honored?

What I'm getting at is this: Is there such a thing as God's will for our lives? And if so, how do we come to understand it?

This is a big issue. It's an important issue, and frankly I'm troubled by how loosely and casually some speak of God's will. A woman in Birmingham once told me that she prayed for a parking space at a crowded

mall, and when she found one concluded that it was God's will for her to go shopping. Others have endured great tragedy, and with no other way to account for the tragedy, have thrown up their hands, and said, "Well, it must be God's will."

Two things. First, I don't think God is involved one whit with parking spaces at malls or anywhere else. The woman was trying to explain to me that she was living in complete dependence upon God for all things. "God even provides me with little things," she insisted, "like parking spaces." My more cynical side, and yes I do have one, says, "If God provides everything, what were you shopping for?" Remember who I am: a parent of a child with profound mental retardation. I don't want to talk about God providing parking spaces at the mall when there are much bigger issues to attend. While I appreciate this woman's zeal, we must be careful not to equate coincidence with God's will.

And second, not everything that happens in the world is God's will. I'm convinced that we've got to get past that belief. Unfortunately, many things happen in life that are not God's will. A toddler stumbles into a swimming pool and drowns. It's a terrible tragedy, but let's not call it God's will. If we're not careful, some of our theology ends up making God into a monster. Sometimes it depicts God a murderer on a mass scale. If we did some of the things we attribute to God, we would be put in prison or deemed insane.

So is there such a thing as God's will? And if there is, how can we understand it? I want you to dive into the deep end with me this morning, and let's wrestle with this important issue.

Did you notice what happened to Paul and Silas in Acts 16? Paul was on his second "missionary journey," as we commonly call them. He made three of these journeys, traveling from city to city starting new churches and strengthening established churches. You may remember that Paul and Barnabas, Paul's travel companion on the first missionary journey, had a sharp disagreement. Barnabas took John Mark and went one way, and Paul took Silas and went another. Paul and Silas then picked up Timothy, and this is what Luke says about their work, "So the churches were strengthened in the faith and increased in numbers daily."

That brings us to Acts 16. Luke says that Paul and his team intended to go to Bithynia, but “the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them.” That’s the only reference in the book of Acts to “the Spirit of Jesus.” I wonder if Luke was intending to take the reader back to chapter nine where Paul met the Spirit of Jesus on the road to Damascus and had his life altering conversion. It says that the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them to go to Bithynia. It was their will to go there, but the Spirit of Jesus prevented them. So instead they went to Troas on the coast of the Aegean Sea. About two hundred miles across the Aegean Sea lay the region of Macedonia.

Here’s what happened. That night, presumably while asleep though the text does not say, Paul had a vision. A man across the sea in Macedonia was standing and pleading with Paul. I can still see this man in my mind from Dr. Cunningham’s description, standing on tiptoes, hands cupped around his mouth, calling out to Paul. “Come over to Macedonia and help us,” he earnestly pleads. Now, notice what happened. When Paul saw the vision, the text says that “we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.” Their will was to go one place. The Spirit of Jesus prevented them. Paul had a vision, and they all decided that it was God’s will for them to go to Macedonia instead.

So, yes, I do believe God has a will, a desire, a purpose, for our lives. Jesus told us to pray “thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.” Before his crucifixion, Jesus prayed that “this cup” would pass from him. Yet what he surrendered to was “not my will but your will be done.” The Apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesians, “Do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.” The Bible speaks in broad strokes about the will of God. It does not seem to be concerned about parking spaces, whether or not we get our hair cut today, and things like that. Like the father of the prodigal son, God has set us free, knowing that only a free man or woman can truly love and serve God. The father’s will was that his son stay in close communion and serve him. The son exercised his freedom, though, and violated his father’s will. Of course, you know that he ended up in a pigpen, right? Now it would have been wrong for this son to say, “Why did my father do this to me?” Or, “What is my father trying to teach me by sending this misery upon me?” That wasn’t his father’s will. That was the result of freedom misused.

So think broad strokes. God's will for us is that we love and serve God. God's will is that we honor and love others. Those are the two great commandments, Jesus said—to love God with all we are and to love our neighbor as we love our self. Those are the commandments that should direct every decision we make. When we come to a fork in the road and must decide which way to go, we weigh the decision against those two commandments. For me, it was clear when we entered into the work at Lincoln Village. It began with Eugene Worley. He had vision of that work and shared it with several of us. And for me, it really didn't take a lot of discernment. Immediately I felt like it was a "God thing" and still do to this day.

However, sometimes it isn't clear, right? And that is where this text is helpful. Sometimes it is anguishing discernment. We want to love God with all that we are. We want to love our neighbor as our self. Yet the direction still isn't clear. What do we do then? Notice that there was a sense of community within Paul's group. When Paul had the night vision, the text says that the others felt "convinced" that God had called them to go to Macedonia. The Greek word here means "to bring together" or "to unite," as in a common mind. The community came to a consensus that God was calling them to go to Macedonia.

We must not overlook the community when we seek to understand God's will. I hear it often. Pastor, will you pray for me? I'm trying to decide some important matter, and it's not clear. People will ask their Sunday School class or covenant group to pray for them. We hear these requests on Wednesday evenings. The community can bring collective wisdom. There may be some person in particular whose wisdom and direction you respect. Talk with that person. Turn to your Bible and other devotional writings. By all means, pray. Don't overlook the community when trying to discern God's will.

And one final thing. Notice what happened after they were convinced. They acted immediately: "We immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them." Once you have a sense of certainty, it's time to act. No more talking. No dragging of the feet. It's time to act with confidence.

Here is a good way to begin every day. At the start of the day, say, "Thy will be done in my life this day, O Lord. I'll handle the parking spaces

and haircuts and such. But I'll depend upon you to help me to love you with all that I am and to love those around me. I will trust that my life then will bring glory to you."

May you be blessed as you understand God's will for your life.

Closing Prayer

Lord, help us to love you. Help us to love others. May your will be done in our lives this day and every day. Amen.