

THE WILL OF GOD AS A WAY OF LIFE

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Deep in our hearts, we all want to find and fulfill a purpose bigger than ourselves. We realize that we are not wise or strong enough to find that bigger purpose by ourselves. We need the guidance of a wiser, stronger, and more loving being than ourselves. Apart from the guidance of God, all hope of discovering purpose will end in disappointment. God must speak to us if we are to find a satisfying answer to our quest for that purpose.

Now more than any time in history, people are searching for the larger purpose that will give value and significance to their lives. Their imaginations are fired by the modern expectation that all can live significant lives, an ideal that has been given a gigantic boost by the opportunity for choice and the many resources at our disposal. Ironically, this same resource-laden society cannot agree on the answer for questions about meaning. There is an abundance of resources and a lack of purpose.

At the rate many people these days are going, they will be exploring careers at thirty, becoming adults at forty, wondering what they were created for at fifty, going back to college at sixty, settling for second best at seventy, and still waiting to hear the call of God at eighty. And then they'll die.

If they had done something faithfully, humbly, and with a consciousness of God's care for the little things, they could have made quite an impact. But if they did nothing, because they were always trying to figure out the perfect something, many of the resources that they have inherited will remain undeveloped.

Roads to Nowhere

To respond to the call of God, we have to hear it. It is easy to hear another person in a room without distractions. Hearing becomes more difficult if the room is full of people, music, and a television. The world

we live in is more like the noisy room than the quiet one. Our world pulsates with background noise and many insistent, competing voices. In order to hear the call of God in the midst of many voices, we have to grow in discernment.

Discernment is a quality of hearing that allows us to filter out distraction and focus on the message being communicated. The biggest distraction to developing discernment, I suggest, are inadequate methods of hearing from God. These consume spiritual energy which would be better devoted to growth in discernment.

Distinguishing Individual Calling and Corporate Calling
"The practical question of how we know the will of God for our lives cannot be solved ... unless we have some prior understanding of the will of God in general" (Sproul, 30). When seeking direction from God, we first have to ask which will of God it is we are seeking. We must distinguish between the individual calling, which is fit especially to an individual, and the corporate calling that applies to everyone. Individual calling is part of our life response to God that we make as unique individuals. Corporate calling is that part of our life response that we undertake in common with all other followers of Christ.

An individual calling refers to the tasks, gifts, and missions God has laid on an individual through direct, specific, supernatural revelation. Corporate calling is the believer's sense of purpose that comes from

Christ's first calling to "Follow me," even when there is no discernible supernatural communication. In other words, we gain purpose from corporate calling as we take ownership of Christ's general commands and apply them creatively in our area of influence. Individual calling is God's response to that application.

It is possible to assume that without a special individual calling, there is no call at all. But such an assumption can lead to a

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disastrous slide toward passivity, a burying of the talent in the ground. The servants in Jesus' parable of the talents were rewarded in a large degree for how they showed initiative and resourcefulness while he was away. They made decisions, took risks, and showed a high degree of enterprise to fulfill the general directive of their master. In the sense of the parable, no Christian is without a calling.

We should not try to make decisions by piously manipulating God to reveal His sovereign will for us as individuals. This is the will that is hidden from us. Instead we should concern ourselves with the revealed, corporate will of God. As we line up our energies with His corporate will, our individual calling will begin to emerge. Individual calling is found in the interplay between God's general call to and our faithful response.

Inadequate Methods

With the distinction made between individual and corporate calling, I'll illustrate some inadequate methods of discerning God's will. Selfish motives, superficial methods, feelings, or circumstances are inadequate means for developing a lifestyle in the will of God. The problem with selfish motives is clear to the believer. The problem with superficial methods, feelings, and circumstances is that they are often given authority in the decision making process. None of these are unimportant in our choices (nor are they wrong in themselves), but they should never be given authority.

Lucky-Dipping

Lucky-dipping is best illustrated by a humorous anecdote. There was a man who needed to discover the mind of God about a matter. Since this was an important matter, and knowing that God speaks through His Word, the man turned to a random passage in the Bible. He opened to Matthew 27:5 and read, "Then he went away and hanged himself." Unsatisfied with this answer, he flipped to Luke 10:37, "Go and do likewise." Now alarmed, he turned to John 2:5, "Do whatever he tells you." Flipping coins or other superficial ways of making choices have a certain appeal because they allow us to avoid the responsibility and hard work of developing discernment.

Feelings

Decisions based on feelings are often unwise because our feelings can mislead us. You could feel great about something that is totally wrong, and you could feel terrible about something that is totally right. You can feel very happy and yet be dying inside, dying in your soul, dying to God. Or you could feel like a failure when in fact you are really a spiritual success and a hero. For example, Jonah slept soundly in the hold of a ship while running from God's will. Jesus agonized in Gethsemane in its fulfillment. God

does wish for us to align our feelings about things with His feelings, to bind our feelings to wisdom, but this is a much deeper feeling than the flitting moodiness that burns off with our first cup of coffee in the morning. Feelings that are stabilized by wisdom are a powerful tool, but they must be coached and trained through years of experience.

Circumstances

Events and circumstances are important factors in decision making. However, they are not "road signs on the way of life, put there by God to reveal his will to us, or to tell us which way to go." Haddon Robinson offers a more complete perspective, "Circumstances are simply the factors that bring us to the point of decision. They often outline the decision that is to be made, but circumstances in themselves are not necessarily signs of God's guidance ... the things we see in circumstances often say more about us than they do about what is really happening" (Robinson).

The problem with circumstances is that opportunity is sometimes misleading. Just because we can do something doesn't mean we ought to, even if the thing is permissible. All the doors could be open and the choice could still be wrong or unwise. Just because a door is open does not mean it should be walked through.

Here's the bottom line. Inadequate methods of hearing the voice of God provide a shortcut past the difficult work of transformation. Divination does not require transformation. A life lived in the will of God, though, requires the transformation of our discernment. God aims to develop a new mind, a new way of valuing and judging, and not just to reveal new information to us. His aim is our transformation, sanctification, and freedom by the truth of His revealed Word. In wisdom, God often withholds information from us. He does this not out of cruelty, but to encourage our transformation.

To live the will of God as a way of life is to live in alignment with a constellation of truths. Alignment with these truths allows the intentions and purposes of God to penetrate our discernment. They do not give categorical direction to every situation we encounter, but put us on a trajectory of transformation.

The Audience of One

Marlene Dietrich was an actress and singer in the 1920's and 30's. She issued vinyl records of applause; two sides of nothing but applause. Occasionally, she invited friends over for an evening and insisted that they listen to both sides. While they listened, she soberly recited the location of each performance. That was Rome. That was New York. That was Cologne.

It is easy to be out of step with a crowd, not too hard to march to a different drummer. But it is truly difficult, perhaps impossible, to march only to our own drumbeat. Most of us, whether we are aware of it or not, do things with an eye to the approval of some audience or another. The question is not whether we have an audience but which audience we have. We live for the applause of someone.

We have moved from an inner-directed world in which calling acts as a compass to the other-directed world of modern society in which our peers are our real guides. Our roving radar has many chances to pick up on their cues. Technology brings distant people easily within reach, which has led to a lot of distraction and inattentiveness. More seriously, technology brings into reach a wide and varied audience of many people. Tools like Facebook and texting, for all their convenience, keep our cue-seeking radar busy with distracting background noise.

To live in the will of God is to shift our awareness of audiences to the point where only the last and highest, God, counts. It is to live for one concern, the pleasure of God and His recognition only. Those who care for the applause of the audience of one can afford to be careless of lesser audiences.

Living before the one audience of God does not, however, put the individual outside of corporate responsibility. It is misinterpreted when construed as license for the maverick. Living before one audience is intimately bound to corporate calling. And corporate calling often challenges individual identity.

Here's a plug for simplicity to add some practical perspective. Simplicity is one of the most powerful means to train us to live before the audience of God alone. To live before His audience is, in many ways, to live a simple life. We are not simple creatures. We want a lot of things, things for ourselves, others, and the glory of God. But Jesus calls us to simplicity, to seeing the world with one eye, for one master, and for one audience. Simplicity is cultivated as our habits in daily life shape our values and ideals and as those ideals propel us to pursue greater focus. External simplicity is closely related to internal simplicity. As we cultivate simplicity in spending habits, the investment of time, and the use of technology, we gain a razor sharp focus that can be turned to the one audience that really matters.

Desiring God's Will

The very word religion can mean binding, yoking, or relating. Physically, this yoking is our participation in the life and actions of Christ. In our spirits, it is uniting our will with God's to will what He wills. Yoking together with God means learning to want what God wants in the world and pull in His direction.

Two extremes regarding desires should be addressed. The first extreme is that desires are unimportant or even detrimental to our choices. The second extreme gives desire more authority than wisdom and revelation. We have to acknowledge that our desires are selfishly twisted by the Fall and treat them with appropriate skepticism. At the same time, we must acknowledge the place they hold in Christian judgment as God redeems them.

Jesus identifies the first and greatest commandment as "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind" (Mark 12:30). First and foremost, we are called to someone, God, and not to something such as motherhood, mission work, or teaching. Neither are we first called to somewhere such as the inner city or Outer Mongolia. Those are secondary callings. Secondary callings matter, but only because the primary calling matters most.

Union with God is how Jesus defined heaven in His high priestly prayer of John 17, "That they may know thee, and Christ whom thou has sent." The more we know the Father, the better we understand His motivations and the more clearly we can discern His will becomes. A central part of the will of God, then, is understanding and conforming to the motivations of God.

Desiring the will of God is an acquired skill through which one can apply the truth of God to all issues and situations in life, even those that are not directly addressed in the Bible. It gives us great creativity and flexibility as we intuitively discern where God is directing, not on the basis of explicit command but through the revealed interests of God in the world.

God does not just reveal information to us. He calls us to Himself. We are called first to be a certain kind of person. We are first called to take on ourselves the character of Christ, to want what He wants in the world, value what He values, and participate in His desires. Our individual calling emerges when the sharing of love for love, value for value, and desire for desire projects through our own set of gifts, the needs around us, and the counsel of others.

Attending to Little Things

We tend to agonize over the big questions. Will I get married? Whom does God want me to marry? But maybe we have it backwards. Whether we choose to marry and whom we choose to marry matters less than how we build lasting relationships long before we consider marriage. Living within God's will does not mean achieving a final product without preparation along the way. A lot of that preparation and eventually the direction of our lives take place in the little things.

Every decision we make has big implications. The little choices we make every day often have a cumulative effect far exceeding the significance of the big choices we occasionally make. Who we choose to become in these little choices and how we choose to live every day create a trajectory for everything else. As the poet Ralph Waldo Emerson observed, “Sow a thought and you reap an action; sow an act and you reap a habit; sow a habit and you reap a character; sow a character and you reap a destiny.”

The little responsibilities we take on prepare us for big responsibilities later, good decisions in the little things set the stage for big opportunities yet to come, and faithfulness in things that appear to have only modest importance enables us to respond wisely to duties that seem, and perhaps are, very important.

We face our greatest challenges not when God requires us to live heroically and sacrificially but when He calls us to be faithful in our daily routines. Brother Lawrence wrote, “Our sanctification does not depend on changing our works, but in doing that for God’s sake which we commonly do for our own. The most excellent method of going to God is that of doing our common business without any view of pleasing men, and purely for the love of God.”

There is uncomfortable ambiguity in this, but the ambiguity serves a purpose. God lays claim to every moment and motive of our lives. God doesn’t just want us to do something for Him; He wants us. It is through our faithfulness in the little routines and habits of our lives that God claims our first attention. This is where we do spiritual weight lifting to discern and fulfill the will of God in larger arenas.

The will of God begins, in other words, in a life lived for God right where we are. It is not an ideal set of circumstances we imagine for ourselves. It is the cumulative effect of our good choices on our desires, hopes, and what we think of as the good life. In this way, we come to know the will of God as a life calling through experience itself.

Live Free or Die

A new cologne by Tommy Hilfiger was promoted by the tagline, “Go where you want to go. Do what you want to do. Live how you want to live. That’s what freedom is all about. Freedom.” Pop American culture defines freedom as the absence of external restraint and the protection, as well as the expansion, of personal rights. What if this freedom, the freedom to choose anything we want and the resources to have most of it, keeps us from experiencing the freedom we really need?

Freedom appears to be as much of an enemy as it is a friend.

However much we may cherish it, we feel cursed by it too. Absolute freedom is absolute insecurity. To be bound to nothing and no one is to be absolutely alone and faced with endless choices. Such freedom is paralyzing, not liberating. Artists and athletes have it right! They give up the freedom to do whatever they want, subject themselves to strict discipline, and in the end gain the freedom to perform at the highest levels of artistic and athletic achievement. They find freedom by being bound to disciplines larger than themselves. That is true of Christian achievement as well. It is through the mastery of self, lesser desires, and out of control appetites that freedom is gained to pursue the audience that matters most. Those who contribute to the work of Christ are willing to surrender lesser things for the truer freedom that comes with the work of Christ. Paul underscores the discipline of freedom when he wrote, “I do not run like a man running aimlessly; I do not fight like a man beating the air” (I Cor. 9:26).

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To let God’s active will into our lives is not to become passive but more active. God’s will turns our wills on, not off. God’s desires form, uproot, and refurbish our desires to be more alive and vibrant than ever before. And God’s mind turns our minds on, not off. His interest is to bring us fully alive as we despise sin, turn toward Him in humility, and allow Him to work His image into us. God is seeking not to reveal the perfect set of circumstances or to unveil information, but to develop the character of our heart, will, and mind. It is in this that we experience the freedom from sin and lesser things that distract from the call of God. We can then respond intuitively to His call, message, and action in the world.

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