

## What does the Bible teach about: Knowing the will of God?

### Introduction

Christians have probably been discussing how we can know God's will for us since the days of the apostles! It has certainly been an active topic all of my lifetime. In a sense, this is healthy. I would be worried about any believer that had no interest at all in the will of God, and simply did as they pleased. However, much of the discussion has tended to be mystical and theoretical – as if knowing the will of God, is a special secret with mysterious techniques, known only to an elite class of Christians.

**Knowing** the will of God is also too easily divorced from **doing** the will of God! If we only know God's will without acting on it, we are no better off. In fact, we may be worse off if we become guilty of deliberately not doing what we know we should!

For these reasons, I would like to attempt some demystification and simple practicality this morning. I will talk more about 'knowing what God wants', and 'doing what God wants'; because I find these phrases, straightforward, clear and to the point. I'm convinced that the link between knowing and doing is vitally important. This connection is at the heart of the analogy I am going to use today to try and help us better understand this important aspect of Christian practice.

### A workplace analogy

We are God's workers: His slaves in fact. Our task is to serve and honour our Lord. As Lord, He is very committed to us knowing His will; otherwise we will never be able to obey it! It struck me that how I, as a manager, interact with the workers in my team can teach us quite a lot about knowing what God wants us to do. This is just an analogy, so it doesn't fit perfectly, and it can't be stretched too far; but, hopefully, you will agree it provides some useful insights.

I'm not claiming to be the ideal boss, but I try and take my responsibilities seriously and this has the following implications for my team:

1. I try my best to explain clearly what I want from them and I endeavour to ensure they have all they need (such as resources, skills and time) to deliver it.
2. I give my team regular feedback on how they are doing.
3. I try to know and develop my staff through activities such as training, assigning new responsibilities and setting 'stretch' targets.
4. I try and correct any problems as quickly as possible.
5. I **do** want them to think for themselves (but in the right way and within the right parameters).
6. I am interested in **them** as people, not just their outputs.
7. They are never 'cannon fodder' or expendable.

It isn't very hard to see that all these points are true of how the Lord deals with us as His servants; and remember He is far and away better at this than I can ever be!

### **1. I try my best to explain clearly what I want from my team**

Do we imagine that our Lord doesn't know what He wants from us, or isn't sure how to communicate that clearly? Like Moses, we might sometimes think we don't have the skills to do what God seems to be asking. Like Gideon, we might believe we are far too insignificant and fearful to do great things for the Lord. But when we are trying to understand what God wants from us, it is best to start with the belief that God has a clear plan and is determined to lead us through it. He is unlikely to reveal all of that plan at the start, but we can trust Him to carry us along one step at a time.

### **2. I give my team regular feedback on how they are doing**

We tend to worry about 'guidance' at significant milestones in our lives: university, marriage, children, relocation, retirement etc. In between those milestones we struggle along by ourselves. But I don't only speak to my team every few years! We meet, or talk, frequently so I can check that they are on the right track. Likewise, the Lord wants to talk with us every day, multiple times a day, to assure us He is walking with us and to teach us to follow Him in small steps as well as the big ones.

### **3. I try to know and develop my staff**

Our focus should be on learning to know God and enjoying fellowship with Him, rather than on the details that we so often obsess about. The Lord is less concerned about precisely which university I attend, or which job I apply for, than He is about whether I will serve Him faithfully in that place or role, and how I might learn to follow Him more closely through these experiences. Even our mistakes and failures are used by God to teach us lessons and develop our characters.

Read carefully the Bible histories of God's great servants, such as Abraham, and you will see that they record the 'on the job training' that God put them through! They all learnt to discern what God wanted from them in the smaller matters of life, before God put the big challenges in front of them. How might that work today? You might ask the Lord to show you an area of your life He wants you to work on with Him. Try and listen to God speaking over the next few weeks to help you see what that area might be. If you lose your tempers three times in a day, maybe that is the thing to look at! Then ask God to put you in situations where you can learn to develop whatever it may be and, when one comes along, ask Him to teach you the lessons you need. It is this kind of 'practice' that can help you to discern what it is like when God speaks quietly to you and you can make your mistakes where they have limited impact!

### **4. I try and correct any problems as quickly as possible**

One of the big worries people have around knowing what God wants, is what happens if we get it wrong. How will we ever serve God again if we have misunderstood His will and done the wrong thing? We are human beings. We make mistakes. Let me make two simple points:

a) As I said a few moments ago, it is better to learn how to follow God in the small matters of life before we come to the big steps. If we know His voice and have learnt to distinguish it from our own longings or fears, we are much less likely to make mistakes in the 'big-ticket' decisions.

b) Everybody makes mistakes and experiences failure. Just read your Bible and see how David, Abraham and Sarah, Moses and all the rest made mistakes; sometimes huge ones. God never

abandons His servants and is incredibly gracious and tender in picking us up, putting us back on our feet and setting us moving again on the right path. Sure, some of the bigger mistakes may have painful consequences in the future, as David found out, but the Lord can turn even those into stepping stones to future service. God prefers to point out our mistakes as quickly as possible. We need to keep listening, even after we have made a decision, and be prepared to change course if appropriate.

### **5. I do want my staff to think for themselves**

In the Old Testament, God sometimes refers to the strangest people as “My servant”, even using this phrase for the wicked King Nebuchadnezzar in Jer 25:9, before declaring in verse 12 that he will punish the king for what he is about to do! God used these people to achieve His purposes, but He used them more like a workman uses his tools than as willing collaborators with Him. They served God’s purposes almost unwittingly, sometimes even unwillingly. That is **not** how we should serve our Lord. Psalm 32:8,9 set out the pattern for how God wants to lead us. “I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will guide you with My eye. Do not be like the horse or like the mule, which have no understanding, which must be harnessed with bit and bridle, else they will not come near you.” So, God wants us to use the minds He has given us and think for ourselves. He offers to teach, instruct and guide. All three of those involve us using our minds to learn, understand and respond intelligently. We are not radios, or telephones, unthinkingly receiving messages from a distant source. If God is to guide us with His eye we will have to be looking at Him and following His gaze to see what He is looking at, then understanding for ourselves what it is that God wants at this moment. If we don’t quite ‘get it’, He wants us to come back and ask Him again for clarity or more wisdom (James 1:5).

### **6. I am interested in them as people, not just their outputs**

Only the worst kind of boss sees his workers as ‘resources’ that must be exploited pitilessly to maximise their output. It would be scandalous to suggest God might treat us that way. At the heart of what God wants for us is an ever-maturing relationship with Himself. He treats us all as the unique individuals He has made us to be.

Yes, He has tasks for us to do: as Eph 2:10 says, “For we are [God’s] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.” Sometimes it may require significant personal cost from us to complete those tasks, but God never views us as just a means to an end.

### **7. They are never ‘cannon fodder’ or expendable**

Only Satan, and those he inspires, view people in such a way. However much we may puzzle over the difficulties God seems to be leading us into, we can be certain He cares deeply about us and isn’t just manipulating us uncaringly.

### **Signpost or guide?**

I see what God wants us to do as having two main elements, which are:

- His general will and
- His specific will.

God’s general will, is something that is applicable to all believers. You might think of this as a series of fixed signposts: markers that have been set in the landscape for the purpose of giving clear direction to everybody that passes. They have the same message for everyone. We see this

in passages like 1 Thes 5:18, where we read, “In everything give thanks, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.” Or 1 Pet 2:15, which says, “For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men.”

God’s specific will consists of His particular requirements for **me**. This is God acting as my guide, giving specific, detailed instructions, tailored for me and my current circumstances. We encounter it in passages such as Psalm 32, which I have already quoted.

Continuing my workplace analogy; God’s general will equates to the company strategy, and His specific will parallels an individual’s personal objectives. A worker’s personal objectives will never contradict the strategy or go off in another direction. But while it might be hard to see how the strategy applies to a particular role, or the choices and challenges a person faces today, the personal objectives should have that detail. They set out how an individual should play their part in contributing to the ‘big picture’. The two aspects are not contradictory, and we don’t get to choose between the two. Both are necessary; they just fulfil different, but connected, purposes. Most of the advice I have encountered in the past about knowing God’s will tends to focus on the specific and overlooks the general. This creates two significant problems:

1. We risk reaching conclusions about God’s specific will for us that contradict his general will. Such conclusions will always be wrong – God never contradicts Himself. 1 Thes 4:3 tells us, “For this is the will of God, your sanctification.” So, we are to be holy, that is, set apart as suitable for God’s service. This clearly means that God’s specific will for me cannot involve doing things that will make me unholy.

2. If there is any ‘secret’ at all to knowing what God wants us to do, it is that we must learn how to understand what and how God thinks, and what His priorities are. These are exactly the kind of things into which God’s general will gives us invaluable insights! It is therefore next to impossible to know God’s specific will without investing time and effort in understanding His general will.

Signposts are extremely useful things, and ignoring them is never wise, but a guide walking with us has lots of extra benefits. For example, you can talk to a guide; while conversations with signposts tend to be a little one-sided! In John 15:15, Jesus says to the disciples, “No longer do I call you servants, for a servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I heard from My Father I have made known to you.” So, we are more than just mindless slaves (though we **are** still slaves), blindly doing what we are told without having any context or understanding. Paul goes much further when he says, in 1 Cor 2:16b, “We have the mind of Christ.” Imagine that! The spiritual person, the believer who is indwelt by the Holy Spirit and actively seeking to live by His direction, can know and think with the same thoughts and priorities as Christ Himself. That is Christ’s plan for us in knowing what God wants, that we should be thinking and acting, as He did in this world, with the Father’s will always directing everything we do. That really is something to aspire to! But, I repeat, this is not a level that only an elite class of super-Christians can ever attain, this is how **all** of us are meant to live our lives.

### **Some key points**

Let me just run through some simple, practical points really quickly. Some I have already mentioned.

a) God obviously **wants** us to know what He wants!

b) It might help us to know our own will first. A famous philosopher is meant to have said that he

tossed a coin before every important decision. If he was disappointed with the outcome, at least he now knew what he really wanted in his heart! We can easily fool ourselves into being 'guided' towards what we naturally desire. It helps to know our own hearts. But, doing God's will is not always in conflict with our own desires. In fact, the idea is that we **desire** God's will, i.e. want the same things as Him. This is what having the "mind of Christ" is about. There may be a big cost at times to choosing God's way, but we can still desire it if we genuinely trust that God knows best.

c) We will need to know our Bibles. The Bible is our only access to knowing how God thinks and what His priorities are. This isn't about finding one verse that can tell us God's will for today. It is about learning to know the Lord from what He tells us in His word. Which runs into my next point.

d) We will need to understand what, and how, God thinks and what His priorities are. This seems almost too obvious to state, but it does need saying again: knowing the will of God, or knowing what God wants me to do, can only come from pondering how He has revealed Himself in the Bible. Serving God is ultimately satisfying and knowing God's will, in order to do it, is really about serving Him. Don't divorce knowing from doing, or guidance from service. Knowing is only the means to the end. Doing, or serving, is the end, and this is where true satisfaction comes from. Doing what God wants may just be the secret to the genuinely fulfilled life that so many people crave!

e) We are not meant to be mindless robots. God doesn't intend us to work like Charlie's dad in the Willie Wonka story, screwing tops onto toothpaste tubes! Guidance is about a relationship with God and understanding His plans.

f) We might have to wrestle with tough choices sometimes. Abraham must have agonised over his decision to offer Isaac in obedience to God's will. There is no easy formula or 'trick' for this topic.

g) Like Abraham, we must learn in life's smaller decisions how to make wise choices in the big things.

h) We are trying to develop the mindset that Paul displays when writing to the Philippians. "For to me, to live is Christ", he wrote in Phil 1:21. Everything Paul did was for Christ and displayed the character of Christ. That is what knowing and doing what God wants looks like.

### **Some significant questions**

You may still have some questions about this important topic, so I will try and anticipate a few of them.

#### **What if I make a mistake?**

I've already covered this, but it's important enough to restate. We try and make less mistakes as we grow up as believers, but we all still get it wrong sometimes. Don't worry that because you have made a mistake you have messed up God's perfect plan for your life and that everything else will be second best from now on. That is not how God's grace works, and it is not how guidance works! Never doubt God's readiness to forgive, and to teach you vital lessons from your mistakes.

#### **Why doesn't God make it more obvious?**

If only we heard voices from heaven like the Old Testament prophets did, giving us a detailed set of instructions! We forget that they still had doubts and made mistakes. They didn't have the Holy

Spirit living within them all the time and they didn't have access in prayer to a heavenly Father in anything like the way we do. Trust me, they would have been deeply envious of what you have today!

### **What should I do if I'm just not sure?**

The answer rather depends on how important the issue is! If it is something minor, you might want to move ahead carefully, asking the Lord to hold you back or redirect you if you are making a mistake. If it is a really crucial decision that you might not be able to change in future, I would advise waiting until you **are** sure what the Lord's wants before proceeding.

### **Should I listen to advice or warnings from others?**

Yes, but discerningly rather than just letting other people make all your decisions for you. Sometimes, you have to be prepared to submit to the greater wisdom and experience of others. Occasionally though, if you are really clear that God wants you to follow a particular course, and that course fits with the 'signposts' of God's word, then you may have to be bold enough to ignore well-meaning advice to the contrary.

### **"But Lord, what about this man?" John 21:21**

Beware of being too interested in what God wants **other people** to do. Peter was told bluntly that the Lord's will for John was none of Peter's business!

### **Why do you want to know God's will?**

This is really a question I am asking you! Are you really prepared to submit to what God wants in the matter you are seeking guidance about? Don't be too surprised when you don't get a clear answer to your prayers if you have already decided in your own heart what you intend doing!

### **Finally**

Jesus' promised to be constantly with us, saying, in Matt 28:20, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age." This undertaking to personally **be there**, is worth much more than some dream of clinically clear guidance, or mystical knowledge of God's will, apart from walking closely with Him. We are not offered a heavenly 'Satnav', instructing us to 'perform a U-turn if possible'! We are guaranteed an infinitely knowledgeable, reassuring, local guide; holding our hand and leading us safely along the trickiest of ways!

Thank you for listening to this truth for today talk on What Does the Bible Teach About, Knowing the Will of God?, talk number T1131.

New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless stated otherwise.

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