

How Do I Find the Will of God?
LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church
September 10, 2023 AM Sermon
Reverend Peter Jonker
Acts 15:1-21

This morning we start out new fall sermon series. The series is called “I Was Just Wondering...” It’s made up of questions asked and issues raised by the youth of our congregation. Last spring, we polled you young people, mostly you middle school and high school youth, and we asked you, what are the Bible texts that interest or perplex you? What are the issues that you want to hear addressed in a sermon? We got lots of replies, more than 30 ideas. And from those we narrowed it down to ten questions. All our sermons from now till the end of November will be based on these youth questions. The good news for all of you less youthful people is: most of the youth questions and issues are also adult questions and issues. The questions asked by the youth are the same questions we end up asking our whole life. That includes today’s question: “How Do I Know God’s Will?” Good Question. Really good question.

So how about it? How do I know God’s will? Before we go any further, let’s be clear about what we are asking. Because when we talk about God’s will we could be talking about different things. Sometimes when we talk about God’s will we mean God’s law. Sometimes, before they read the ten commandments ministers will say things like: ‘listen to God’s will for our lives.’ And by that they mean, God’s rules for living. God’s will = God’s rules. If that were the sense of will in this question, it would be relatively easy to answer: God’s rules are all the moral instructions laid out for us in scripture. The ten commandments and all the other places where we hear moral instructions from God.

But I don’t think that’s the sense of will that you young people were looking for. When you ask what is God’s will for my life, you’re asking, when I face an important life decision like: should I go to college or not? How do I know what God wants me to do? How do I know God’s will for me in that decision? That’s a question we ask all our life. Whether we are 18 or 80, every big decision we Christians face leads us back to this question. Lord what do you want me to do? What is your will for my life?

The Bible passage for today is a description of a whole group of people asking our question. In Acts 15 the church is trying to find God’s will for all the Gentiles, the non-Jewish converts, whom the Holy Spirit has been bringing into the church. The question is: should these Gentile converts be circumcised and required to obey the whole Old Testament Law, or not. It was an important question and it was a question that people disagreed about. They disagreed about it sharply, so they needed to find God’s will. Watch how they did it and let’s see what we can learn.

So, how do I find the will of God? Before we go any further and answer that question, let me say something provocative. There’s a sense in which the answer to that question is: you can’t know the will of God. Maybe that sounds discouraging. Let me try to explain what I mean. I am one of those people who plays Wordle. It’s a daily word puzzle you can do online. You have 6 tries to discover a five letter word. After each guess, the game tells you how many letters you got right and how many you got in the right place and by process of elimination, you zero in on the word. It’s a fun game. When you finally solve the puzzle, all the tiles go green and the game gives you a little feedback: Splendid! Impressive! It’s a satisfying moment. Of all the thousands of possible answers, you found the right one!

If you are asking a specific question in your life, if you are facing a specific life decision (like should I go to college or not) finding the will of God is not like doing the Wordle. There is no process that will make all your tiles go green and a message pops up saying splendid! You solved it! You discovered God’s will! Now you know exactly what to do! It would be nice if things went that way. We love certainty. We hate uncertainty. But God simply didn’t make us for that level of certainty. We aren’t creatures of certainty; we are creatures of faith. There are all sorts of Bible passages that remind us that we can’t know God’s will at that level of detail. ‘God’s ways are not our ways.’ ‘We see through a glass darkly.’ ‘It is not for you to know the days and the times.’ ‘We live by faith and not by sight.’

But the news is not all bad. Though we cannot know God’s specific plan for our life at every moment and in every situation, we can know his will more broadly. We can’t find God’s will as a specific answer, but

we can know his will as a way. As we will see in this Bible passage, we may not be able to get Wordle certainty, but there are absolutely things we can do now that help figure out whether our decisions are moving with God's plans, or against them.

So the early church faces a hard choice: "What do we do about the Gentiles coming to faith? Do we make them get circumcised? Do we make them follow all the laws about food and dress and ceremonies? What does God want us to do?" How do they discern God's will for that situation? How do they come to a decision that is in line with God's plan? I would like to share four things that they do which can guide us in our decision making. These are not in order of importance; they're more in order of what we see in the passage.

First, experience: our experience of what God is doing in this world can teach us God's will. Notice in our passage, when the people are trying to decide what to do about the Gentiles, what leads them to think that the Gentiles don't need to be circumcised and keep all the old laws? It's their experience of what the Holy Spirit is doing in the world. Peter stands up and he talks about how when he preached at Cornelius' house, the Holy Spirit came upon the Gentiles who were listening to his sermon before he baptized them or circumcised them or anything. "I saw the Holy Spirit move among those uncircumcised pork-eating Gentiles!" "God purified their hearts by faith!" And then Paul and Barnabas get up and start telling the stories from their missionary journeys. "We saw the same thing as Peter! When we preached, the Holy Spirit came on the Gentiles and made them part of the church!" These stories of what the Holy Spirit is doing in the world end up steering the early church towards accepting and including the Gentiles without making them change to follow all the Old Testament laws.

When you face a big decision, pay close spiritual attention to what's going on around you. Through prayer and contemplation, ask yourself, what is God already doing here? Say you're making a college decision. Are there things happening that move you in a certain direction? It could be something remarkable: Are there coincidences, are there chance encounters, supernatural signs that push you towards one of the schools? It could be something ordinary and common sense: You got a better scholarship from one school. You got a better feeling when you visited campus. You have more friends going to one school as opposed to another. Pay attention to those things.

God is active in your life! "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purpose." (Romans 8) God is at work. So if you want to know his will, stay prayerful and attentive. Keep your head up, because your experiences could be telling you something about where God is leading you.

But experience alone is not enough. The second tool for finding God's will is the Bible. You see that in this passage. As they make their decision about what to do with the Gentiles, the early church doesn't rely on experience alone to make their decision. They use the Bible to test their experience. When James gives the final decision, he quotes the Bible. He quotes the prophet Amos. Amos prophesied that God would bring the Gentiles to become part of his people. So James says, "Look everyone! Our experience of what God is doing in our lives fits with what the Bible says." Verse 15: "The words of the prophets are in agreement with this."

Because we are sinful creatures, because we don't see things perfectly, because we can deceive ourselves, we can't just use our experience to discern God's will, we need to measure that experience against the testimony of the Bible. 1 John 4 says "Test the spirits to see if they are from God." Not all spirits are from God. Not all our feelings and desires are good. How do we sort out the good inclinations from the bad? We measure them against the testimony of the Bible. And not just the rules of the Bible. You need to know the laws of the Bible to know God's will, but you must know the story. Because the story of the Bible is the will of God for the world. If you know the story of the Bible, you know God's grand plan for the world. It's the story of a God who does not abandon a world corrupted by human sin, but who sent his Son to save the world. Through his death and resurrection, through sacrifice, through grace, Jesus redeemed us.

Now the Spirit is at work in us and in the world transforming it, and someday Jesus will come back to make all things new. That's God's plan. That's God's will in the big picture. Does the small scale decision you are making follow that story? Does your decision go in the direction of the story? Does it display the Spirit of faith, hope and love at the center of the story? Or does it go in a different direction? To ask that question is to let the Bible steer you towards God's will.

The third thing that helps us discern the will of God is the development of godly instincts. When we develop the heart and mind of Christ, we are in a better position to discern God's will. We develop godly intuition when we let the Holy Spirit form our heart and its passions, our minds and its thoughts, our will and its goals. Romans 12: "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" because then you will know, do you remember the rest? "then you will know what God's will is — his good pleasing and perfect will."

If you are baptized, the Holy Spirit is already working in you. You do not plant the heart and mind of Christ in yourself; Christ, by his Holy Spirit started something in you. He is already at work, shaping you and molding you and pushing you. And you can cooperate with him, or you can resist. If you open your heart to the Spirit and if you open your mind to the Spirit, you will be transformed. Slowly, over time, you will want what God wants, you will love what God loves, you will have godly instincts.

It's a little like someone who becomes really good at a task. I painted all through college, six summers worth of paying my bills in college and grad school. When I first started painting, I had to think through everything I was doing. How much paint to do I load on my brush? How hard do I press the brush against the wall? How thick do I lay the paint on the wall? The more I painted, the less I had to worry about what I was doing. I knew by instinct how much paint to load on the brush, how hard to press, how thick to lay it on. If we keep our hearts and minds open to the Spirit, a similar but far more significant thing can happen to our hearts. We will want what God wants and we will love what God loves and it will just be instinctive to us.

How does this happen. There are lots of ways, but prayer is central here. When we pray we open our hearts and our minds to God. When we pray we say to the Spirit, here I am Lord, here's my life, mold me make me, fill me, use me. On this side of heaven these instincts will never be perfect. We are still imperfect creatures. Your intuitions must be checked against scripture (and against one more thing that I'll mention in a minute), but as you grow in Christ, these intuitions are more and more reliable.

Finally, the last tool for finding God's will for your life is represented by the people in this room: The community of faith. When the church needs to make a decision about what to do about the Gentiles, what do they do? They gather together and they talk about it. And together, they struggle about what to do. Verse 6: "The apostles, the elders met to consider the question. There was much discussion." We are not meant to discern God's will on our own, we are meant to do it together, in this community of prayer, and worship and counsel and support. "The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice." Proverbs 12:15. "Make plans by seeking advice," Proverbs 20:18. "Let the wise listen and add to their learning; let the discerning get guidance" Proverbs 1:5. Finding God's will is definitely a team sport.

And that's not just true in the ordinary "two heads are better than one" sense; that's true in a deeper Holy Spirit sense. Especially since Pentecost, the Spirit works through a community. This is one of the great things about working in a team ministry. When I am thinking about a difficult part of my sermon, or when I'm thinking about a difficult decision in the church, I'll go over into Kristy's office and say, hey, here's what I'm thinking, does that sound right to you? And sometimes when Kristy is working through something, she will come into my office and do the same. That's how finding God's will works. We need each other to figure things out.

So those are the 4 components to finding God's will: experience, scripture, having the heart and mind of Christ, and the help of the Christian community. In the power of the Holy Spirit and suffused with prayer, these 4 things work together to keep us in God's will. They may not produce Wordle certainty, but they allow you to make your decisions in complete confidence that you have been faithful, that you have done what you could and that the Lord will be with you as you move forward.

One more thing. I've tried to answer your question today. I've tried to tell you how to find God's will. But here's what I hope: I hope you never stop asking this question. I hope this question is in your head every day of your life. I hope this question nags you a little every day of your life. Because that's a sign that the Spirit is working on you. That's a sign that the sail of your heart is open to the wind of the Spirit. The sail of your heart is taking its cue from the Spirit's breeze. And I have no doubt that the Spirit will fill your sails and carry you home.

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