

Bible Study - Lecture XI
Brookland Baptist Church
Wednesday, October 14, 2020
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Discerning the Will of God - Part II

Last week we began our study stating that one of the key elements to discerning the will of God for our lives was by understanding that all of our lives have a purpose. Some may still ask *"How can I discover God's will for my life?" "How can I be sure of God's guidance in my decisions?" "God, what do you want me to do?"* Practically all believers have asked questions like these, especially at critical decision points in their lives.

Tonight, we will return to the workbook and explore some of the insights and tools that Laird gives for discerning the will of God for our lives. Let's start with a definition of discernment. *"Discernment is the ability to obtain sharp perceptions or to judge well (or the activity of so doing)."* In the case of judgement, discernment can be psychological, moral or aesthetic in nature.

Within judgment, discernment involves going past the mere perception of something and making nuanced judgments about its properties or qualities. Considered as a virtue, a discerning individual is considered to possess wisdom, and be of good judgement; especially so with regard to subject matter often overlooked by others. Discernment can be *scientific* (that is discerning what is true about the real world), *normative* (discerning value including what ought to be) and *formal* (deductive reasoning); or *perceive* or recognize something; distinguish someone or something difficult by sight or with other senses.

There are two other nuances centered around this word. In First Corinthians 12:10, Paul refers to “distinguishing between spirits” (or “discerning of spirits” in the NKJV) – as a spiritual gift that God gives to believers in order to recognize lying spirits and to identify deceptive and erroneous doctrines.

And finally, Discernment can describe the process of determining God's desire in a situation or for one's life or identifying the true nature of a thing, such as discerning whether a thing is good, evil, or may even transcend the limiting notion of duality. In large part, it describes the interior search for an answer to the question of one's vocation, namely, determining whether or not God is calling one to the married life, single life, consecrated life, ordained ministry or any other calling.

Laird reposes the question and offers an answer. My mental picture for you is that of an individual lost in the woods. They need not decide whether it is their own fault that they are lost, or whether they have been misdirected, or whether they have been the victim of some accident. The individual is asking a question which has often been on people's lips lately: "Where do I go from here?" The average person feels that there must be a path which is the path of God's will for them in those circumstances, but how can we be sure it is God's way. And how can anyone be certain that they won't make a mistake? The original one way to do this is to determine God's plan and purpose for our lives. First of all, we must seek to understand our purpose.

Let me answer the last question first. To be quite honest we cannot be certain until we get to the end that we won't make a mistake, for each person must travel by faith more than by sight. But if they are willing to read the signposts and follow them, they will come out to the place where God wants them to be; and, fortunately, God deals with us where we are. She goes on to say, I am quite sure that the greatest help available in discerning the will of God is reached when we deepen our friendship with him. Those who know God are the quickest and surest at discerning his will. I would prefer the

phrase having a relationship with God, because Jesus always spoke of it as a relationship. Last week, I shared two scriptures that I wanted you to keep in mind to help us understand why answering this question was so important: Colossians 1:9-10 (CEB), and Romans 12: 1-2 (CEB).

We haven't stopped praying for you and asking for you to be filled with the knowledge of God's will, ... so that you can live lives that are worthy of the Lord and pleasing to him in every way: by producing fruit in every good work and growing in the knowledge of God. (Colossians 1:9-10, CEB)

So, brothers and sisters, because of God's mercies, I encourage you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice that is holy and pleasing to God. This is your appropriate priestly service. Don't be conformed to the patterns of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds so that you can figure out what God's will is-what is good and pleasing and mature. (Romans 12:1-2, CEB)

Laird suggests six (6) sign posts to discerning God's will, but we will look at five (5) of them and some others I would like to suggest.

1. Conscience may be of lowly origin. Some people think it is a kind of group wisdom gathered through the ages as men found out that some ways of living led to a precipice(a very steep face or cliff, an especially a tall one., and some to a dead end, and some were truly thoroughfares. I know that much scorn can be poured on this lowly voice within our hearts. Men have done evil believing that they followed the dictates of conscience. The voice is distorted by the spiritual level the race has reached and depends on the sensibility of the one who responds to it.

My two cents; Conscience: How does this Decision Affect My Love for God and Others?

This is the ethical dimension of decision making; an option may appear to be sound on the intellectual level, but it may be unsound on the moral level. We cannot avoid the matrix of personal relationships in the decisions we make. Paul stressed the importance of living with a clear conscience: "I also do my best to maintain always a blameless conscience both before God and before men (Acts 24:16; also see Acts 23:1; 1 Timothy 1:5; 2 Timothy 1:3). God has implanted within us an intuitive sense of right and wrong. As we grow in Him, our conscience becomes more sensitive, more attuned to His desires. When we reject the input of our conscience, the proper response is to confess it (1 John 1:9), not to cover it. A failure to respond in this way will place us under a burden of guilt and take the joy out of our lives.

2. Then there is the lowly signpost we call *"common sense."* *"I prayed for advice,"* said a man once, *"but nothing happened, and I got no answer to my prayers; so I used my common sense."* But who gave him his common sense, and why was it given? If God has placed the machinery for making a judgment within the mind of man, why should he not use it, and why should man regard some uncanny way of receiving direction as more likely to be divine because it is unusual.

My input. Common Sense: Does This Decision Reflect Good Judgment?

A Christian may be committed to the Lord, willing to comply with wherever God leads him, communicating with Him in prayer and in the Word, and enjoying a clear conscience. Even so, he still may not know which option to choose in a specific situation. It is within this framework that common sense should play an important role in the choices we make (outside this framework, common sense may simply feed the me-first mentality).

God was not erratic or capricious in the way He designed the universe, and He is not haphazard in His design for the lives of His children. He gave us minds and He wants us to use them to evaluate the consequences of our actions. The Scriptures tell us to "think so as to have sound judgment" (Romans 8:3). We should be level-headed and not rash in the way we evaluate our gifts and opportunities. Paul, for example, stayed where there were open doors (Ephesus) and left when his life was threatened.

However, common sense has its limitations and it should never be our only criterion for discerning God's guidance. There are times when He leads people do things that are contrary to our concept of good judgment. We are often too nearsighted to see the goal He has in mind. Because we see such a small part of the puzzle, we should always be willing to submit our thoughts and plans to His.

- "The mind of man plans his way, but the Lord directs his steps" (Proverbs 16:9).
- "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:9).

3. Let us not disregard the value of the advice of a friend. I do not mean the counsel of a professional minister or consultant, but talking over one's difficulties with a wise friend who, because he can see the matter from a different angle, can view the pros and cons dispassionately and, because he is outside the emotional setting of the problem, can often give us the most helpful advice.
 - You can trust what your friend says, even when it hurts. But your enemies want to hurt you, even when they act nice. Proverbs 27: 6 (ERV);
 - Perfume and incense make you feel good, and so does good advice from a friend. Don't forget your own friends or your father's friends.

If you have a problem, go to your neighbor for help. It is better to ask a neighbor who is near than a brother who is far away. Proverbs 27:9-10 (ERV)

4. There is another way of using the minds and wisdom of others. We reach it as we read great literature, especially biography and history. Again and again it has been to me of inexpressible comfort to read the biographies of great men. There are very few problems in our lives which great men and women have not had to face before us.
 - The way of the fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice. Proverbs 12:15(ERV);
 - Fools think they know what is best, but a sensible person listens to advice. Proverbs 12:15 (CEV);
 - Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety. Proverbs 11:14 (ESV);
 - Listen to advice and accept instruction, that you may gain wisdom in the future. Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand. Proverbs 19:20-21 (ESV)
5. Not enough is made, I feel, of the voice of the Church. Jesus once strongly recommended to people to consult the Church. (Matt. 18:17.) I feel that it is not too strong a thing to say that no church is functioning as it ought to do unless there are fellowship groups in it to which the puzzled member may bring his own problem.

There are few others tools to Help Us Discern God's Will that I would share:

- 1.) Listen to the A Subtle Voice. Because God honors our choices and desires our unforced love, He does not overpower or coerce us. *"God never burglarizes the human will. He may long to come in and help, but he will never cross the picket line of our unwillingness"* (James

Jauncey). He speaks to us in a subtle voice, and we may be unable to hear Him when there are too many distractions in our lives. Just as we would have trouble carrying on a telephone conversation in a room full of blaring music and chattering people, in the same way the clamoring voices of selfish desires, lack of submission, pride, independence, and unforgiveness prevent us from being receptive to the quiet voice of God.

It may be an urging, a prompting, a recurring thought or scripture that won't subside. Let the peace of God rule and reign – His peace is like an umpire it's been said, helping us decide where to turn. Even if 95% of you feels good about it but there's this nagging sense of it not being right – stop and explore that before you make a move.

- *“Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.”* Colossians 3:15 (NIV)
- *“And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”* Philippians 4:7 (NIV)

2.) Honestly ask for His guidance and discernment. Then fully believe He will reveal it. Sometimes we may have to pause and wait. It's better to practice the pause than to rush into a decision that we might regret. Patience is hard and there may be pressure to make a decision, but wait until you have peace that you have heard from God regarding His will in the situation. We do not have to guess at His will because He has given us the Holy Spirit to guide us. Remember Proverbs: Trust the Lord completely, and don't depend on your knowledge. With every step you take, think about what He wants and He will help you go the right way.

- Don't trust your own wisdom, but fear and respect the Lord and stay away from evil. Proverbs 3:5-7 (ERV).

- The Lord says, "I will teach you and guide you in every way you should live. I will watch over you and be your guide. Psalm 32:8. (ERV)

Laird states, "I have come to the conclusion that God does not encourage us to see too far ahead. One simply must accept the fact that one has no idea where the road one is treading is going to lead. Suffice it to say that when one gets to the crossroads, one will know which way to turn, and although we like to think that it is terribly important not to make a mistake-and I repeat one can never be certain that one has not made a mistake-yet I adhere earnestly to the view expressed in the section on the Ultimate Will of God. Our mistakes, if made in good faith, will not result in our being lost. *"We shall not miss our providential way."* God often wonderfully weaves mistakes into his plan, as he also weaves our sufferings and our sins."

Laird ends this section, by leaving the reader with two challenging questions:

- 1.) Do I really want to discern God's will, or do I want to get his sanction for my own? An amusing story is told of a minister who was invited to a church at which the salary was four times what he was already receiving; and, being a devout man, he spent many hours in prayer seeking to discern the will of God. One day a friend met the minister's little boy in the street and said, *"Well, what is your father going to do?"*

"Well," said the little boy, *"Father's praying, but Mother's packing."*
(Bigger is not always better!)

The father was saying to God, *"What wilt thou have me to do?"* and the mother, no less good-intentioned, was saying to God, *"This is what I am going to do. I hope you will approve."* Discerning the will of God does really mean putting ourselves out of the picture-not choosing a way as his because it is unpleasant (we have dealt already with that

fallacy), but certainly not going to the other extreme and saying, *"This is what I am going to do. Please approve, because I want so badly to do it."* Who has had a situation like this?

- 2.) The second challenging question is this: Have I got the courage to do God's will when I discern it? Many people ask a great many questions as to how they may find the will of God, and every minister knows what it is to sit down with an inquiring person in order to find out the answer to the question. But most ministers have also had experience of those people who, seeing clearly the will of God, say, *"No, anything but that."*

Next week will do the case studies and share some other ways to discern God's will. Then, the following week we will skip chapter 5 and discuss chapter six, Doing God's Will once you discern how to stay in it and learning your Calling versus your Career.