

Christian Life Chapel
of
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Sermon Transcript
Sunday, September 27, 2020

The Choice That Pleases God
Acts 1:15-17, 20-26

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Sermon Text
Acts 1:15-17, 20-26

¹⁵ In those days Peter stood up among the brothers (the company of persons was in all about 120) and said, ¹⁶ “Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus. ¹⁷ For he was numbered among us and was allotted his share in this ministry.” ...

²⁰ “For it is written in the Book of Psalms,

*“May his camp become desolate,
and let there be no one to dwell in it’;*

and

“Let another take his office.’

²¹ So one of the men who have accompanied us during all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, ²² beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up from us—one of these men must become with us a witness to his resurrection.” ²³ And they put forward two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also called Justus, and Matthias. ²⁴ And they prayed and said, “You, Lord, who know the hearts of all, show which one of these two you have chosen ²⁵ to take the place in this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place.” ²⁶ And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias, and he was numbered with the eleven apostles.

Introduction

When I was asked to speak, it was suggested I pick the subject I would speak on. As I prayed about it, it seemed the most transparent and mutually relevant subject I could speak on, as you seek a new pastor and we seek a church in which to serve, is how do we make a decision with confidence that we are choosing what God would want? This question is typically phrased, "How do I know God's will?" Instead of presenting you with a nugget of truth (and you can learn a lot from a good nugget), today we will be discussing a Grand Canyon of truth, taking a high-level view of a lot of nuggets.

In our journey this morning we will look at the question, "How can we confidently choose what God wants?" Then we'll look at God's Will, God's Calling, and God's Plan.

Question: How do we choose, with confidence, what God wants?

Can we have confidence that the choice we make is what God wants? This is a big question, and a common question for people to frequently ask.

Having wrestled with this before, I can tell you from experience that the challenging crossroads in our lives can be valuable growth opportunities; but, if we view them simply as point-in-time hurdles, we miss the bigger opportunity. In preparation for this sermon I sought examples of when biblical heroes wrestled with this question, "How can I know God's will for my life?" What I've found so far, and you can be sure I'll continue to look, is not at all what I expected.

Surprisingly, there are few people in the Bible portrayed as wrestling to know God's will. Sometimes people just make bad decisions, and deal with the consequences (Adam & Eve). Sometimes God is talking with someone, and they listen (Noah, Abraham, Moses). Sometimes we observe people simply making a decision. Their decision could be based on selfish desires (Sampson, Saul); or they make a choice based on what they know God wants (Joseph, Ruth, Esther, Nehemiah, Daniel). They simply make a choice. There are surprisingly few examples of people struggling to know God's will.

We do, however, have clear examples of God providing guidance.

1. In Exodus 13:21 we see the Lord leading the Israelites with a miraculous show of His presence. *"And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night."*
2. God provided clear leading through the breastplate of Aaron (Ex. 28:13-30), with the Urim and Thummim. These were *"over Aaron's heart whenever he enter[ed] the presence of the LORD. Thus Aaron will always bear the means of making decisions for the Israelites over his heart before the LORD."* We don't know what these were; but, they appear to be a device to help make decisions, not unlike flipping a coin.

3. Yet, in the NT, we see Jesus speaking with Thomas saying, "*Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed*" (John 20:29). In early history God established his presence and character before an ignorant humanity, with demonstrative actions. What is called for now is something far deeper. It is the stuff of relationship and maturity, which are a far greater blessing. Like the Abrahamic covenant, Abraham believed. His faith was the basis for his actions, and it was counted to him as righteousness. Today I'll be sharing processes to help with decisions; but, please don't miss this point: the virtue of a decision, and the decision process, hinges on relationship (in that, the very process of discerning serves to strengthen your faith and walk with God; and, in this case, with each other as well).

Years ago I was faced with a life-changing decision that drove me to pursue God's leading. Faced with an ambiguous process, I learned steps that brought focus on the decision, and on the Lord, with peace and confidence.

The first part of the process came from John MacArthur. In his systematic style, he identified where the Bible referred to the "*will of God*," and then alliterated his findings. Though somewhat simplistic, it makes more sense to start at this point than it does to avoid it. Let's call this stage, "*How to know the will of God*." Here is a summary of his points:

What is God's will?

1st - God wills for everyone to be saved: (1 Tim. 2:3-4) "*This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth*". (2 Peter 3:9) "*The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish but that all should reach repentance*". We open-mindedly refer to people as being on a "spiritual journey," but there must come a time where a person willfully and deliberately chooses to accept God's gift of salvation. To be clear, one need not do anything to reject God's salvation. Unless you embrace God's appraisal of you as a sinner, unless you acknowledge your need and accept Christ's gift of salvation, unless you specifically confess Jesus as Lord of your life, then you have rejected Him, and you are lost. It is, instead, God's will that you be saved.

2nd - God wills for everyone to be Spirit Filled: (Eph. 5:15-18) "*... Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. And do not get drunk with wine for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit*". This refers to a life reflecting submission to God's revealed plan for your life, rather than control by any element of the culture around you.

3rd - God wills for everyone to be sanctified: (1 Thess. 4:3-7) "*For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor*". When the standards of society are hurtful, and cloud a person's view of God, or His perfect intent for their life, it is necessary to deviate from those standards. God is not silent to point that out. God wills for us to be conformed to His standard of purity, and not that of the world around us.

4th - God wills for everyone to be submissive: (1 Peter. 2:13-16) "*Be subject for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good. For*

this is the will of God, ...". To state the opposite, it is not God's will for His children to be troublemakers, obstinate, or prideful. Here Peter, whose feet Jesus washed, shares a personally intimate lesson with us of Jesus' example of submission.

5th – God wills for everyone to be suffering: (1 Peter 3:17) "*For it is better to suffer for doing good, if that should be God's will, than for doing evil*". With so many of the heroes in the Bible, including Jesus, we see examples of people who made good decisions and suffered for it; but, the goal was not for them to suffer. Here Peter is not saying it's God's will for us to suffer (though, elsewhere Paul explains how suffering is inevitable – Phil. 1:29; 2 Tim. 3:12). Rather, Peter is saying that if you suffer for doing wrong, that's your own fault. If you're going to suffer, make sure it's for making the right decisions.

6th – God wills for everyone to be saying thanks: (1 Thess. 5:18) "*...give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you*". Our praise is recognition of God's character (or who He is), our thanks is recognition for God's actions (or what He has done). Luke tells us (Luke 17:11-f) of 10 lepers who Jesus healed, at their request. After being healed, only one bothered to thank Jesus, illustrating how rare gratitude is. God wills that we be like the one, and not like the other nine. And our gratitude should not just be for getting what we want. We should be thankful in all circumstances, acknowledging a trust in God's goodness, and that He is able and will use any and every situation for His good purposes.

7th – If all these things are true, then do whatever you feel like doing: (Psalm 37:4) "*Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart*". If you are truly living by the previous six points (you are saved, spirit filled, sanctified, submissive, suffering and saying thanks) you may confidently choose whatever seems appropriate.

Though I find this outline helpful, I struggle with MacArthur's conclusion, for three reasons:

1) What God wants of us is not limited to a phrase using the words "this is my will" (It appears nowhere in the Ten Commandments). In that sense, the more we know His Word, the more we know His will.

2) In every other relationship the evidence of the kind of intimacy that intuitively discerns the other's will is the lack of their having to say, "This is my will." The evidence that I truly know my wife's will is when I do something without having to be asked.

3) It is possible that a strong believer, of whom all six of the points are true, still struggles with a decision, and they should not add to that struggle a sense of guilt for their conflict. Good people wrestle with hard decisions.

While MacArthur's outline is helpful, I sensed something was missing; and, as I wrestled with this, I found there is more.

To get there, we need to discuss two familiar characters in the New Testament: Matthew and Zacchaeus (Matt. 9 cp. Luke 19). These men were historical contemporaries. Both were probably Jewish. Both were tax collectors, working for the Roman government, and both repented of sin and followed Jesus; but, while both are

portrayed as equally following Jesus, they were each asked to follow Him in a different way. Matthew was asked to become one of “the twelve,” and go into “full time Christian ministry,” while Zacchaeus was asked to continue his work as a tax collector, but to do so honestly. In other words, these two men equally obeyed what God wanted for them that was the same (God’s revealed will). Yet, they equally obeyed Jesus’ unique and distinct directives (what I’ll call “God’s calling”). Thus, in making a decision, it is helpful to distinguish the two: God's will (that which is the same for everyone) and God's calling (that which is unique to you).

I've heard it said that you cannot know God's hidden calling until you first acknowledge His revealed will. This same sentiment was expressed years ago by a co-worker of mine, an agnostic who was struggling with God and the gospel. One day he asked if we could have lunch together, where he confessed that God had answered and satisfied every question he's asked. He went on to say that while he still has doubts and questions, he doesn't think he can expect more answers until he first acknowledges what God, by his abundant grace, has already revealed. My friend and his wife have been growing believers ever since.

In the same way, acknowledging God's revealed will is the first step toward understanding God's specific calling. Listen to this familiar passage from Proverbs; and, in this context, you might hear it in a brand new way:

“Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths” (Prov. 3:5-6, ESV).

Let's hear this again from the New Living Translation, *“Trust in the LORD with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding. Seek his will in all you do, and he will show you which path to take.”*

So, how can we make a decision with confidence that we are choosing what God wants? First we need to conform our lives to God's revealed will.

In my own search, this helped me appreciate MacArthur's outline, and apply myself to it, but it also whet my appetite to know God's specific calling.

What is God's calling?

As I struggled with my decision, one Saturday I decided to read the book of Acts until I found a historical example of how the disciples made choices. I had read the entire book 6-7 times before I finally realized my answer was in the first chapter. What follows is a summary of what I found, that I encourage you to consider.

In Acts 1 we see 120 disciples huddled together wondering who should take Judas' place. Here we see clearly identifiable components of their process.

1st - *Criteria* : In verses 21-22 we see that the candidate needed to have been someone in the company of the disciples from the baptism of John until Jesus' ascension, and a witness of the resurrection. This didn't just mean they witnessed 3 events; rather, they were faithfully following Jesus the whole time. Following MacArthur's style of alliteration, we can see certain *Criteria* were needed for a candidate to be considered.

Before you evaluate options, establish indisputable criteria. This provides assurance of a quality decision, streamlines the options, and wards off subtle compromises.

2nd – *Counsel & Collaboration*: From verses 12-26 (14 verses) I counted 18 uses of a plural pronoun ("they," "us"). Their decision was made by a group. *Counsel & Collaboration* were clearly part of the process. The decision was not made in isolation; and, by requiring unity, the process provoked unity.

3rd - *Call*: In verses 24-25 we see the group appealing to God in prayer, seeking His guidance in the decision; what, for the sake of alliteration, we will title, "*Call*." The text tells us they spent time in prayer together.

4th – *Conditions*: Verse 26 reveals a deliberate *Condition* where they cast lots, much like the Urim and Thummim. Tim Keller explains that when people ask him how to know God's will, he just tells them to "make a decision." We want God to give us a definitive, point-in-time decision. Keller says, "there are parents who micro-manage their children; but, God is not one of them." At this point in the decision process, it is very likely either decision would be a good one. Plus, the process of deciding (owning the consequences, and trusting the Lord), is what makes us grow. And, what does it say of our faith if we remain paralyzed by indecision? Proverbs tells us "*Commit your work to the LORD, and your plans will be established.*" If your incremental steps are all in the context of obedience and reliance upon the Lord, you can trust that the subsequent decisions will be guided by God's purposes.

If that seems glib, another form of condition is what we see with Gideon and his fleece (Judges 6:36-40). Here Gideon exercised what I refer to as my "knucklehead prayers." I respectfully and humbly ask God to make it clear, multiple times, knowing what a proud and simple knucklehead I am. While this may not be theologically dignified, the honesty of a willing heart, with a humble attitude, is pretty Scriptural.

5th - *Circumstances*: In Acts 16 we see what some refer to as an "open or closed door." In this case, God intervened and blocked Paul and his companions from going where they intended to go. Jonah experienced this too. This could come during the decision process, or it could come after the decision. Regardless, the Lord sometimes uses external circumstances to oppose or validate a decision.

What we've seen is that to make a decision with confidence that we are choosing what God would want we must first align ourselves with God's revealed will. Then, working with counsel and collaboration, we establish a baseline of criteria, and call out to God together, seeking His direction, while looking for specific conditions and unexpected circumstances that could influence the decision.

6th – In the end, and this is our sixth point for determining the calling of God, there is indeed a mystical element involved, that some explain as the subtle leading of the Holy Spirit, or what might fit our alliteration as *Conviction, Conscience* or *Confidence*. Jesus said that "*When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth*" (John 16:12-15). Isaiah (30:21) said it this way, "*And your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, 'This the way, walk in it,' when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left.*" Later (48:17) Isaiah stated, "*Thus says the Lord, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: 'I am the Lord your God, who teaches you to profit, who leads you in the way you should go.'*"

Both Jesus (Mark 2:8) and Paul (Acts 23:1) relied on the influence of their internal conscience.

So, we start by conforming to God's revealed will (which is the same for everyone), then we pursue God's calling (which is unique to you). The final element in determining how to make a decision with confidence that we are choosing what God would want I'm going to categorize it under the title "God's Plan," which includes four general principles.

What is God's Plan?

1st - "Peace:" You may not be "at peace" with the decision, or the process. I wouldn't characterize Jesus as being "at peace" the night before He went to the cross; but, He knew it was what He needed to do. Don't wait to be overcome with tranquility. If you have followed these steps for God's will and God's calling, you are in safe territory for a sound decision, regardless of how you feel. Jesus said (John 14:27), *"Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid."*

2nd - God's control: Your strongest affirmation from the Lord may not come until after the decision is made. One friend of mine said, "Sometimes it's easier to understand God's will in the rearview mirror than through the windshield." Listen to the dialogue between Joseph and his brothers, after their father (Jacob) died (Gen. 50:18-21), ¹⁸*"His brothers also came and fell down before him and said, 'Behold, we are your servants.' ¹⁹ But Joseph said to them, 'Do not fear, for am I in the place of God? ²⁰ As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today. ²¹ So do not fear; I will provide for you and your little ones.'"* Joseph was convinced that God guided his journey. God never ceased to be in control. We can't over think our decisions. Remember, *"... for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose"* (Rom. 8:28).

3rd - Agenda: If you want to be lead by God's agenda, you have to resign your own agenda. Joshua 5:13-ff As the new leader of Israel, Joshua is approached by The Commander of the Army of the Lord. Joshua asks, *"Are you for us, or for our adversaries?"* A therapist would refer to this as a "closed question." Joshua only understood two options, and the Commander responded, "No!" He explained that He did not represent Man's priorities; rather, He represented God's priorities. Joshua got it, responding with an "open question," reflecting an open heart, as he bowed and asked, *"What does my lord say to his servant?"* The Proverbs teach us *"with the humble is wisdom"* (11:2); and *"to the humble [God] gives favor"* (3:34).

4th - Relationship: The God of heaven is more concerned with your relationship with Him than He is with a specific decision. Decisions in life are like tests in school. They force us to cram; they provoke incremental growth, yet they are just moments in time. In-and-of-themselves, they don't determine who you are, or what you will become. That is a function of the ongoing process of preparation. Not only is the Lord's priority not whether you turn left or right, He doesn't want to be like a GPS you only use when

you need direction. He wants to be in relationship with you, as an individual, and as a church. He wants your attention; and, if you truly are in an intimate relationship with Him, like any relationship, you will have the confidence of knowing when your choices and actions are consistent with His desires (Heb. 12:1-2).

You may not feel peace, trust in God's control, resign your own agenda, and focus on your relationship with the Lord.

As I mentioned, I've applied this lesson in my own life; and, if you're curious, I asked, she said, "Yes" and we've been happily married for 29-½ years. Now I'm applying this lesson for the next chapter in our lives together.

Here me church. Every good decision that every saint in the Bible made includes some combination of these steps. The most important thing is the intimacy of one's relationship with God, not a formula. These steps can guide you in building that relationship, which will help you make a decision with confidence that you are choosing what pleases God.