

## Core Class: on God's Will

### *Decision Making & the Will of God – Part One*

Delivered by Pastor Jason Tarn on March 21st, 2010

#### Introduction

This morning's Core Class is focused on a "core" issue of Christian practice, that is, learning how to make good, godly decisions in light of God's will. No matter what season of life, we're always facing decisions. And as sons and daughters, it is our privilege to turn to our Heavenly Father for guidance because he *is* concerned with every detail of our lives. *What school should I attend? What degree should I get? Who should I date? Should I marry this person I've been dating? Am I in the right career? Should I make a switch? Should I save my money? Or invest it? Or spend it?*

**So how do we decide? And how are we to seek God's will in the process?** Well, if you ask ten Christians, you'll probably get ten different answers. There are so many different techniques and approaches out there that well-intentioned Christians have used to discern God's will. But though they're well-intentioned, I think they're often misguided. Consider these two examples:

Suzanne needs direction from the Lord. She has saved a little money, and wants to invest it from her retirement. Since her husband died, she hasn't had anyone she feels she can lean on for sound advice. A nice young man from her church visited recently and talked about annuities and other investment strategies, but much of it was over her head. She has also heard from her alma mater, which is looking for people to invest in their childhood education program, and several Christian organizations have appealed to her for gifts. Not knowing what to do, Suzanne sits down in her favorite chair, her Bible in her lap. "I need You to tell me what to do, Lord," she prays silently. "Show me through Your Word." Then she picks up her Bible, flips it open to a page, and begins reading. "But Jesus said, "Let the children alone, and do not hinder them from coming to me ... for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.'" Suzanne takes this as God's leading that she is to invest in children ministries, and she decided to send her money to the college.

Douglas is a teenager, active in his youth group at church, and anxious to obey the Lord Jesus. He knows that Scripture calls him to heed the will of God, but he isn't sure what God's will is for his social life. So Douglas has worked out a system for Friday nights. First he makes a list of the girls he wants to take out on a date. Then he begins phoning, starting at the top of the list. If the line is busy, he takes that as God's sign that he is not to date that girl. If no one answers, he is to wait and try again later. If the phone rings and the gal he's interested in answers, that means God has given His blessing for Douglas to ask her out.<sup>1</sup>

Now some of you might think these examples are exaggerated, but others may recognize how real these approaches are – based on your church background or personal experience. Making life decisions, big or small, on the basis of a gut feeling, a random Bible verse, a vision OR by applying different techniques like throwing out a fleece OR by reliance on an open door, closed door theory...these are approaches to decision-making common to Christians of all backgrounds. **But are these approaches helpful and effective? And more importantly, are they God-honoring and soul-edifying?**

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<sup>1</sup> Examples from Bruce Waltke, *Finding the Will of God: a pagan notion?* (2002)

**The goal of this Core Class is to offer a biblical, understanding of God's will and how we are to make good decisions in light of it.** Today I will focus on defining what we mean by God's will and how a right understanding of his will should shape our decision-making process. Next week, Dr. Frank will focus specifically on the biblical pattern for godly decision-making.

## **The Two Wills of God**

So let me start by asking you a question: **Have you ever prayed, "Lord, show me your will"?** **Well what exactly were you looking for?** What were you expecting him to do? How did you expect him to guide you? These are the questions we rarely ask, but the answers we find in the Bible could completely change the way we understand God's will.

Now the term "God's will" is ambiguous. It could actually be used in different ways. The classical distinction is between God's will of decree and his will of desire.

### **God's Will of Decree**

**First, we could be talking about God's preordained plan for your life – what we call his will of decree (aka. his sovereign will).** I think all of us are familiar with this concept. Let's say you didn't get into the school of your choice or maybe that relationship didn't work out or maybe you never imagined yourself in your current profession. Someone might say to you, "That must have been God's will." What they're referring to is God's will of decree – his preordained plan for your life, for my life, for this world.

Here is a simple way of putting it: **God's will of decree is whatever happens.** In other words, whatever God decrees, comes to pass and whatever comes to pass, God decreed. So in one sense, you are always doing the will of God. You may not be aware of it when you make a decision, but whatever decision you end up making *is* God's will of decree.

*Now where is this taught in the Bible?* I could point to a number of passages but here are two in particular. **Psalm 139:16** says, "*All the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be.*" The psalmist's biblical worldview led him to see his days (his life) as preordained by God – with the imagery of being written down in a book like a diary but reversed.

**Ephesians 1:11** – "*In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.*" The Apostle Paul says that Christians were chosen – we were predestined unto salvation -- according to the plan of *him*. And who is this *him*? It is God who "works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will".

So God has a will (a purpose), and he decrees for every single thing – every moment, every action, every inner motive, every free decision -- to all work out according to his will of decree. All Paul is doing in Ephesians is applying the doctrine of God's sovereign will to the doctrine of salvation, giving us the doctrine of predestination. **So does God have a specific will for your life?** YES – a will that not only encompasses your salvation but "everything" in your life and in this world.

## God's Will of Desire

Now there is another way the Bible uses the term “God’s will”. **It could refer to the kind of life God wants us to live – what we call his will of desire (aka. his moral will).** We’re talking about the kind of life God’s desires of us. **1 Thessalonians 4:3** sums it up best. Here Paul says, *“It is God's will that you should be sanctified.”*

Isn’t that amazing? We stress ourselves out trying to figure out God’s will for our lives, when all the while it is right here in Scripture. His will is that you be holy, that you be like his Son. Now I realize we typically want something more specific, but let’s not take this lightly. God has made his will for you clear: *You are to be holy.*

Now unlike the will of decree (which you are always doing whether conscious or not), God’s will of desire is something you have to consciously do. For example, **1 John 2:17** -- *“The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.”* Or **Matthew 7:21** – *“Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.”*

**So what does it mean to “do” the will of God?** It means to obey the will of desire that he has revealed in Scripture. That means you’re doing God’s will – you’re in the center of his will – if you are obeying his laws, which are summed up by loving God and neighbor (Mt. 22:37-39). So think about some of the choices you have to make: *Should I hold a grudge or forgive? Should I cheat on my spouse or my exam or my taxes?* The fact is that, most of the time, figuring out the will of God and doing it is not as mysterious or confusing as we tend to think. You already know the answers to many of the decisions you face because the Lord has told you in his Book.

## The Differences

So let’s summarize what we’ve seen so far. There are four contrasts to consider:

- God’s will of decree is what *will* happen. But God’s will of desire is what *ought* to happen.
- We are always doing his will of decree. But we can fail to do his will of desire.
- God’s will of decree is usually hidden from us. But his will of desire is clearly revealed in Scripture.
- We are not responsible to search out God’s will of decree. But we are responsible to search out his will of desire in the Scriptures and to do it.

There is one verse that really captures these distinctions. **Deuteronomy 29:29** – *“The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law.”* **The “secret things” refer to God’s will of decree.** It belongs to him – for him to know and for him to reveal to his creatures as he determines. **But the “things revealed” are part of his will of desire.** And notice how he reveals it in the words of his law that we may follow this will – that we may do it.

So God’s will of decree encompasses every decision you make. In one sense, you’re always in God’s will. Yet this will is mysterious. But we’re not left in the dark. He has revealed his will of desire in Sacred Scripture, and we are responsible to know it, to internalize it, and to approve it as “good, pleasing and perfect” (Rom. 12:2). It is a “will” you are called to figure out and do. Now these are the classical uses of the term, but when the average person seeks God’s will, he/she is usually looking for something more specific.

## A Third Will of God? -- His Will of Direction

They are usually referring to what is called God's will of direction. Kevin DeYoung, in his book on Christian decision-making called *Just Do Something*, explains that when most people seek God's will, they're looking for "His individual, specific plan for the who, what, where, when, and how of our lives. We want to know His direction." So when someone prays, "Lord, show me your will", they're usually looking for his **will of direction – his divine direction for us regarding a specific choice in light of a perplexing decision**. I'm talking about decisions that are so perplexing because Scripture doesn't point us one way or the other. It's silent.

Now some want to call this a "third will of God" as distinct from the classical two, but I wouldn't. That's because this idea of seeking God's will of direction is nothing more than an attempt to seek and know God's will of decree in advance *before* it happens and particularly *before* we have to make a decision.

Let's say your friend is wondering if she should go back to school for another degree. Now when she says she's seeking God's will, what she probably means is that she is trying to figure out if going back to school is part of the preordained plan God has for her life. She wants to know his plan in advance to help her decide. The general assumption here is that God's will is like a puzzle that needs to be solved or a riddle to be figured out. So we're tasked to do our best, through prayer and any number of techniques, to figure it out *before* we're comfortable making a decision.

Now this impulse to figure out God's will of decree is understandable. If we only knew his specific plans for us in advance, then we'd have more peace and confidence in whatever decision we make. But the crucial question we have to ask it this: **When we are faced with a decision (where Scripture is silent), is there biblical warrant to expect God to reveal his specific plan for our lives?** Or we could put it this way: **Are we supposed to figure out God's will before we make a decision?**

Now I am not questioning if God gives guidance to his children when we're faced with perplexing decisions. What I am questioning is whether we have scriptural warrant to expect God to give us an answer, a sure sign, to show us what we should choose *before* we actually choose. This is where the confusion lies when talking about God's will.

## Liberating You to Decide

I think our confusion stems from a category mistake. We've confused the first two wills of God and failed to make the proper distinctions. What I mean is this: We're trying to figure out God's will of decree as if it was intended to be searched out and known like his will of desire. This confusion leads to three potential dangers:

**Frustration** – If we expect God to reveal his will of decree to us, then we might conclude that God is ignoring or neglecting us when he does not reveal an answer with the clarity or certainty that we expect. That leads to frustration.

**Passivity** – If we are not comfortable making a decision until we have a sure sign from God, then we’ll be crippled with indecision, so we end up delaying important life decisions or just avoiding them altogether. That stunts our growth in maturity.

**Fear/regret** – If we fail to realize that we are always in God’s sovereign will of decree no matter what decision you make, then decision-making can be down-right scary because any “wrong” decision means you’ve failed to do his will and missed his wonderful plan for your life. And you’ll probably be plagued with regret over past decisions that didn’t turn out well.

**My goal is to liberate you from the frustration, passivity, fear and regret that often accompanies our decision-making by showing you that the search for a will of direction is not a prescribed practice for Christians.** It is not the normative pattern for decision-making found in the New Testament. At the risk of sounding cheeky, I’d say that, for a lot of Christians, the way they try to discern God’s will amounts to little more than shaking up a Magic 8-ball and looking for it to say “Outlook good”.

### **Modern-Day Divination?**

There was a term in ancient times for this kind of approach to God’s will – divination. The goal of divination is to discover hidden knowledge (usually of future events) in the mind of god(s). In his book, *Finding the Will of God: a pagan notion?*, Bruce Waltke argues that the popular approaches to “finding God’s will” boil down to some form of divination, which is a pagan notion.

He goes through the various methods used in ancient times by pagan cultures: casting lots, looking for signs in animal guts (or organs like the liver), watching the stars (astrology), relying on fortunetellers, or conjuring up the dead (necromancy). Now in Deuteronomy 18, God explicitly condemned such pagan practices (18:10-11). Yet Waltke points out that God did sanction “six circumstances in which he chose to reveal his divine mind through supernatural means of divination.”<sup>2</sup> The six are: by prophets, by Urim and Thummin, by sacred lot, by dreams, by signs, and by audible words.

Now we don’t have the time to consider each one, but what I want to emphasize is the historical placement of these permitted methods of divination within the timeline of God’s redemptive plan. In other words, there is a reason why these supernatural methods are found predominately in the Old Testament. Consider this point that Waltke makes in his book:

“There are no examples of explicitly seeking or finding God’s will after Acts 1:24-26, in which the disciples drew lots to select Matthias as a replacement for Judas. There are dreams, visions, and revelations after this, but never in the context of explicitly seeking God’s will. From this point onward it is not divination (seeking to probe the divine mind) but revelation given by God to His people. After Pentecost there is no instance of the church seeking God’s will through any of the forms of divination listed above [that is, the six methods he mentioned].”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Finding the Will of God*, 42.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 53-54.

So why was there a significant change between Old Testament and New Testament practice? Well notice his emphasis on Pentecost – the event in Acts 2 when the Holy Spirit came down and filled the New Testament church. **It is because the indwelling presence of the Spirit of Jesus in the life of believers radically changed things.** His presence changed the way we worship God, the way we pray to God, the way we study and keep God’s law, and the way we make godly decisions in life.

Paul teaches in 1 Corinthians 2 that the Holy Spirit helps us discern spiritual truths in the Word of God so that we can have the mind of Christ (2:16). And with this “mind of Christ” we can make life decisions using our sound judgment, prayerfully guided by Scripture, informed by wise counsel, in light of our giftedness and ability, according to our circumstances, and consistent with our passions. Dr. Frank will expand on this next week.

**The point I am trying to make is that there is no biblical warrant for the New Testament believer to *expect* God to supernaturally reveal his will to help us make life decisions.** Now this is not to say that God cannot, in our day, communicate with his people through supernatural means like dreams, visions, prophets or audible words. I’m not denying that.

Here is an example of what I means. In Acts 16:6-10, on three separate occasions, God supernaturally intervened to change Paul’s travel plans. In v6, Paul apparently planned to enter the province of Asia (most likely to its capital city Ephesus) but was kept from doing so by the Holy Spirit – it wasn’t his time yet. In v7, he then attempts to go into Bithynia but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow him. And then in v9, Paul is given a vision of man of Macedonia urging him to come over with the gospel.

Now in all three instances, Paul receives divine guidance by supernatural means, but notice that Paul never seeks this out *before* he decides his travel plans. Rather, it appears he made his plans but held them loosely, so that *if* or *when* God calls him in another direction, Paul was ready and willing to scrap his plans and go where God leads. There are a number of examples in Paul’s letters where he speaks of his travel plans with a sense of looseness and flexibility, with a clear dependence and submission to the Lord’s sovereign will:

- Acts 18:21 → [To the Corinthians] “I will come back if it is God’s will.”
- 1 Cor 4:19 → “But I will come to you soon, if the Lord wills”
- 1 Cor 16:7 → “I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits.”
- Rom 1:10 → “I pray that now at last by God’s will the way may be open for me to come to you.”
- Rom 15:32 → “So that by God’s will I may come to you...”

So in the New Testament, we see instances of God providing supernatural guidance but no *normative* practice of divination – of trying to figure out a will of direction to help us make decisions. Let’s hear from Waltke again.

“There is simply no statement in the New Testament that teaches me to find God’s will in this sense [that is, by divination], nor can I find any instances in Scripture of the early church practicing divination after the Holy Spirit has come. There is a radical change between the Old Testament and the New Testament practice. So the practice of using the Urim and Thummim, or going to a seer, or casting a sacred lot is no longer valid for New Testament Christians. I don’t find any verses recommending the Old Testament practices or making them the norm for New Testament believers. The various leadings in the New Testament by prophets, visions, and angelic visitations never occur

in response to attempts to “find God’s will”. Therefore I contend that we need to redefine the idea of finding God’s will. We need to drop entirely the concept of divination, which is not appropriate for Christians. We should reformulate our ideas and focus on what the Scriptures teach about the way our God guides his elect saints to do His pleasure.”<sup>4</sup>

## Seek His Kingdom, Do His Will

Waltke goes on to say that the New Testament never teaches us to seek God’s will but rather to seek his kingdom (Mt. 6:33) and to do his will. So instead of talking about finding the will of God, he recommends we speak of following the guidance of God. DeYoung writes in the same vein with similar advice.

“The conventional understanding is the wrong way to think of God’s will. In fact, expecting God to reveal some hidden will of direction is an invitation to disappointment and indecision. **Trusting in God’s will of decree is good. Following His will of desire is obedient. Waiting for God’s will of direction is a mess.** . . . God is not a Magic 8-Ball we shake up and peer into whenever we have a decision to make. He is a good God who gives us brains, shows us the way of obedience, and invites us to take risks for Him. We know God has a plan for our lives. That’s wonderful. The problem is we think He’s going to tell us the wonderful plan before it unfolds. . . . The better way is the biblical way: Seek first the kingdom of God, and then trust that He will take care of our needs, even before we know what they are and where we’re going.”<sup>5</sup>

So does God have a specific will planned for your life? YES. But does he expect you to figure it out before you make life decisions? NO. **He expects you to make good, godly decisions that conform to his will of desire, all the while trusting in the sovereignty and goodness of his will of decree.**

## A Test Case: Finding a Marriage Partner

Let’s wrap up by applying this to a real life example. Let’s consider a big life decision that most people have to work through: Finding a marriage partner. I’ll use DeYoung’s advice as a framework to think through this.

**1) Trust in God’s will of decree.** What does that look like if you’re trying to find a marriage partner? It means you trust that God’s will is being done in your life no matter the circumstances. If you are single right now, you’re not missing out on God’s will. Don’t treat your life as if it were on hold. Your singleness is not a disease and marriage is not a cure. Instead, as you come to better understand and to more deeply trust in God’s sovereign will of decree, you’ll start to see this time of singleness as a part of God’s good will for you. You may come to see it as a gift from God and a gift to the church because of the numerous ways you can be deployed as a single person for the Gospel’s sake.

Now let’s say, Lord-willing, you get married. Trusting in God’s will of decree *now* means to trust that the one you have married is the person God has preordained for you. Of course, you can only know that in hindsight.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid, 55-56.

<sup>5</sup> Kevin DeYoung, *Just Do Something*, 26 (emphasis added)

So as a single person, you can search all you want for *The One*, but you'll never know for sure, until you stand before God and the church and take your marital vows. And from that moment on, you know exactly who is *The One* for you. It's your husband. It's your wife. Sadly, too many people (even Christians) file for divorce saying, "He/she just wasn't *The One*." They are mistaken, not just about the permanence of marriage, but about the nature of God's will, particularly his will of decree.

**2) Follow God's will of desire.** That means going to the scriptures. Now the Bible won't tell you *whom* to marry but it will tell you about God's desire and design for marriage. It'll tell you that marriage is between one man and one woman (Gen. 2:24). It'll tell you not to marry a non-Christian (2 Cor. 6:14). But more than that, the principle of not being "unequally yoked" would apply to two believers of greatly varying degrees of spiritual maturity. God desires for you to be yoked with a marriage partner who is plowing in the same field, in the same direction.

The Bible will also tell you to only marry someone who has been divorced if their divorce took place on biblical grounds (Matt. 19:9, 2 Cor. 7:15). Otherwise you'll be guilty of adultery because that person is still married to their former spouse in God's eyes. God has made his will of desire known, and he expects you to follow it.

**3) Don't wait for God's will of direction.** What that means is don't wait for God to show you whom to marry. If you're just waiting for a sign from heaven, you should probably call your mother now and spare her the disappointment. It sounds spiritual to say that you're waiting on God to show you which girl to ask out, but don't let that be a cover for your own insecurities. Too many people are praying that God reveals his will of decree in advance so they can alleviate their fears and doubts about getting married. But instead of passively waiting for a sign, keep yourself active with the following:

**Pray:** Pray to God – not for him to show you *The One* – but for him to show you your sin, your fears, your inner motives for wanting to get married. Pray for him to give you clarity of thought and greater self-awareness. And pray less for God to show you the right husband or wife to marry and pray more for him to change you into the right kind of husband or wife that someone would want to marry.

**Seek Wise Counsel:** Make sure you have trusted friends and family around you, who know the Lord, know his Word and who are loving and bold enough to speak truth into your life. They can see your shortcomings better than you. They can also evaluate your current dating relationship in a more objective manner than you can.

**Use Sound Judgment** – That means taking into consideration your stage of life, your degree of independence from your parents, your financial situation, your compatibility as a couple, your individual expectations of marriage and marital roles. These are valid concerns you'll need to work out and talk through.

But then after you've prayed through this decision, after you've sought wise, godly counsel, after you've done due diligence evaluating your relationship and life situation, then I'd recommend taking DeYoung's advice, which he used to title his book. *Just do something!*