

Training Session 6 -The Foundation: Knowing the Will of God (Upstream)

Objective

Equip you to know God's will for your life

Key Text

Matthew 6:33

Bible Study

Is there a plan for my life? If so, how can I know that plan? Should I marry this guy? Should I move to a different city or stay put? Should I take the job offer that is in front of me? These are questions that all of us have asked, are currently asking, and will continue to ask, so we need to put some intentional thought into what it means to know God's will for my life, which is what we will do for the next two weeks. How do I know the will of God for my life?

Knowing the will of God for our lives is a foundational pillar for our lives because most of us want to know we are building something the Lord wants us to build with our lives. We don't want to labor in vain (Ps. 127:1); we want to build a meaningful life. This week we're going to look at the choice before the choice in knowing God's will for our lives. In other words, we're going to begin with the fork in the road that we need to take before we get to the fork in the road that requires us to make everyday decisions around job promotions, marriage decisions, and other big and small life choices. Then next week we'll explore a process for helping us know God's will as we face forks in the road of life.

Now let me set the table for knowing God's will with a story. When I was a pastor in Southern California, a woman walked into my office deeply distraught. "I am in a horrible marriage," she said. "In fact, it never really has been any good. It was doomed from the start." I said, "How is it that you were doomed from the start?" Despondently, she said, "Well, we had to get married. I was pregnant. We were drunk and I got pregnant and I've been living with the consequences of that fateful decision I made over ten years ago. Honestly, pastor, I just have no hope for my marriage. I can't imagine that God will ever bless something when we both deliberately chose not to follow His will."

Many of us approach the will of God this way. We think to ourselves, "I have a choice to make and if I make the wrong choice and I don't follow the will of God for my life when I am at a fork in the road, then I am doomed." No wonder we're so stressed out! Anxiety builds and builds over the choices that we have to make because we want to get them right and follow God's will and we're afraid we'll choose wrong and be outside of His will.

Let's talk. We need a better way. In this training session, we're going to explore a different way to approach God's will that I hope will involve a lot more joy and peace. To begin to walk on a different path full of joy and peace in God's will, keep three Biblical truths in mind:

Biblically, the term “will of God” is used in three ways

Before we get to the fork in the road of life decisions, we have some background work to do on the term “will of God.” What do we mean when we say, “Is this God’s will for my life?” To begin with, we need to clarify which will of God we’re talking about because the Bible uses the phrase the “will of God” in 3 different ways.

Will of decree: The first way in which the Bible refers to the will of God has been referred to as the will of decree. This is everything that God decrees, which is literally everything. Nothing happens without His permission or decree. Ephesians 1:11 says that God “*works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.*” Hear that. God works everything, not just some things, but everything in conformity with the purpose of his will. Drunken pregnancies, our worst sin, our best choices—God works out *everything* in conformity with the purpose of His will.

To be clear, God isn’t responsible for evil, but He permits it, which means that evil is part of his will of decree. Some theologians call this the hidden will of God. Regardless of whether you call it the will of decree or the hidden will of God, according to the Bible, everything that happens is part of God’s will. Nothing shocks Him or is outside of His plan. And there is all kinds of stuff that He allows to happen (or decrees) that make no sense to us. His reasons are hidden. Matthew 10:29 says, “not one [sparrow] will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father.” Which will? His will of decree. There is, however, another way to think of the will of God that relates to His desires.

Will of desire: God’s will of desire is what God desires to happen. Hebrews 13:21 says, “*may he equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him...*” The 10 commandments provide a good example. The 10 commandments are clear expressions of God’s will of desire. If you want to know God’s will of desire, then open the Bible. If you sense God leading you in a way that isn’t consistent with Scripture, then don’t listen to that voice because it isn’t His voice.

Let me illustrate. Bradford and I had a homeless woman stay with us that we’ll call Melissa. We were living in a 2 bedroom condominium in urban San Diego. After some time, she moved out. The following week she showed up at church and we had a little time of fellowship and food after. Bradford came over to me and said, “Hey bud, I think Melissa has on one of my sweaters.” I looked over and sure enough, it was obviously my wife’s sweater that had been lovingly worn over the years.

While I was impressed with her boldness, I also was curious to know what she was thinking, so we walked over and said, inquisitively, “Melissa, Bradford has a sweater just like that one.” We paused, hoping that she would own up to it, and she jumped right in, undaunted, “Yes, I know, God told me to take this from your closet. He said you had too many.” Fair point! I agreed, and had even lobbied along the same lines that we could potentially do a closet cleanout. Nonetheless, I told her, “Melissa, you may be right in that we have too many clothes, but God did not tell you to take it. I’m confident about that because God very clearly says not to steal in the Bible and he never contradicts himself. If you believe we have too many clothes and that you are in need, then we’re happy to have that discussion, but don’t listen to that voice

telling you that this is God's will for your life." So, friends, the first way to know God's will—does it follow His will of desire expressed in Scripture?

Will of direction: This is what most of us mean when we say, "What is God's will for my life?" We tend to mean, "What is the future? God, should I take this job? God, should we adopt?" In *Finding the Will of God as a Way of Life*, Jerry Sittser argues the traditional way most Christians think about God's will is that the will of God is a specific pathway we should follow into the future. Most Christians, according to Sittser, believe God has a specific pathway for us to follow and our responsibility is to discover this pathway. Unfortunately, for most Christians who operate with this traditional view of God's will, God's pathway is not always obvious. This traditional view leaves Christians with the stressful task of figuring out which of the many pathways that we *could* follow is the one that we *should* follow to live out God's will for our lives. If and when we make the right choice, we will receive His favor, fulfill our divine destiny and succeed in life. If not, we're outside of His will for our lives. This traditional understanding of God's will almost has the feel of a game-show with contestants trying to choose the mysterious prize of God's will hidden behind door A, B, or C.

As Jerry Sittser puts it, In the traditional understanding of God's will, "when a decision has to be made, everything suddenly becomes like a maze. We believe there is only one way out. All the other ways are dead ends, every one of them a bad choice." Sittser argues that the conventional or traditional approach is something that is more caught than taught by virtue of how many Christians live this way. We have all asked God for signs and begged and pleaded with Him to reveal His will to us. Why? Because we, like most of our friends, believe there is one right path, one right girl who is my soul-mate, one right college--all the others are not God's will for me. Somewhere, buried deep within, lurks the haunting suspicion that we might be making the wrong decision and will be doomed.

Thankfully, Sittser says he came to an astonishing truth that set him free when he learned that the Bible says very little about the will of God as a future pathway. When the Bible does talk about the future, what we often hear is, "Do not be afraid." Instead, God encourages us to move confidently into the present and do the things that He has already made crystal clear in His word that are His will (i.e. His will of desire), such as "rejoice always, pray continually, and give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (I Thessalonians 5:16-18). If we would just live out these three verses, imagine our lives!

In conclusion, Sittser states, "We do not, therefore, need to fret when we have to make big decisions about the future, worrying about the terrifying possibility that we might miss God's will for our lives. We simply need to do what we already know in the present. God has been clear where clarity is most needed. The choices we make every day – to love a spouse after an argument, to treat an unkind co-worker with respect, to serve food at a soup kitchen– determine whether or not we are doing the will of God. If we have a problem it is not lack of knowledge; rather it is our unwillingness to respond to the knowledge we have." Bingo. The problem isn't a lack of knowledge but a lack of action on the knowledge that we do have about how to live. Put another way, the problem isn't knowing God's will, the problem is doing God's will.

Sittser illustrates this by describing a major decision that he had to make between going into medicine or vocational ministry. He stressed over it for months. One way was the right way, God's way, and he had to figure it out. He felt like one of these choices was God's will for his life, the other was not. And then his wife looked at him and said, "*Who really cares what you decide? I just want my husband back.*" And he says it jolted him out of his self-absorption. He had become so concerned with figuring out God's will of direction for the future that he lacked faithfulness to God in the present. He was anxious, stressed, not loving his wife well, neglecting his studies. We can all relate.

In summary, this means the real issue isn't *knowing* God's will; it is *doing* God's will. This is a major shift. We know plenty of God's will--we just don't do it! So here we have arrived at the 2nd core truth for knowing God's will:

Biblically, knowing God's will of direction for the future happens by being faithful to God's will of desire in the present

Why do you think the Bible over and over again has these expressions that call us to trust and obey God in the present? Jesus says pray for daily bread—not future bread. In the Old Testament, God wouldn't let them collect manna for tomorrow, but told them to collect just enough for today. Why? So we'll trust Him, daily. We want a bank account filled with ample cash, a perfect bill of health, a job that allows us to change the world, and happy and healthy kids. We don't want to trust God. We would rather have GPS coordinates for His will that we enter. Yet, this would be walking by sight, not faith.

We get caught up in the choice that we have to make when we come to a fork in the river of life, but the reality is there is an upstream choice that determines whether or not we'll live out God's will for our lives when we're floating downstream and we reach the fork in the river. The upstream choice is to "*Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well*" (Matthew 6:33). That's the choice before the choice. If all our decisions are made in light of this choice to seek first His kingdom; then whatever choice we make, whatever job we take, whatever mate we choose, whatever city we choose, will become God's will—His will of direction. If your heart is to honor and please God, you can't make a bad decision. If you're truly seeking God, then you will always be doing the will of God. Exhale, the weight is coming off, isn't it? The stress is lowering. Let's take the stress about future decisions down one more notch by looking at the third truth about God's will:

Biblically, worldly success and worldly failure do not determine whether you are in God's will

Remember, the conventional notion of understanding God's will was measured by worldly success. If I make the right choice, then God will prosper my choice through worldly success. Os Guinness responds, "If we judge the wisdom of our choices by how successful the outcome is, we will become confused and disillusioned in a very short time.... Mother Teresa of Calcutta has observed, 'God calls us to fidelity and not to success.'"

A friend of mine is a young Christian. He came to me absolutely elated over his new job. It was his dream job. He had spent his entire career working towards this job. He had to get a PhD to get there and this was the elite group in his field changing the world. This wasn't only going to

be a high paying job—it certainly was that, but it was so much more. They were going to cure cancer and help improve the quality of life for people around the globe. He was giddy.

Two months later he was let go. It didn't work out. The dream job was a nightmare. If success is the measuring stick for God's will, then he made the wrong choice. He was outside of God's will in taking this job. But what if something so much bigger is in play? We have a God who is big enough and powerful enough to take all things - our worst worldly failures, our greatest worldly successes, and work them all out for His purposes. Romans 8:28: "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him and are called according to his purpose." This verse is one of the most well known in the Bible for a reason. We all need to know this truth that in all things--in our greatest worldly success and most embarrassing worldly failure--God's purposes are being worked out for our good. We're called, we're summoned, according to his purpose. He's writing our story (Hebrews 12:2). It's a good story. It's a story that can weave our worst and best together with the world's worst and best, to accomplish His will.

Friends, if you are at a fork in the road that feels weighty, do this. Worship. Pray. Commit to seeking first His kingdom and make a choice with the confidence that your choice, whether it ends in worldly success or worldly failure, will become His will for your life.

This is exactly what Jesus did. Jesus faced the ultimate fork in the road of human history. He paused. He considered the options. He prayed about it. "Father, if there is any other way. Is there another door for me to choose besides the cross?" God's silence was deafening. Jesus heard his answer, loud and clear, and responded, "Not my will, but Thy will be done." Amazingly enough, Jesus chose worldly failure knowing that through it God's will to save mankind would be accomplished.

Oh the glory of the gospel, that God knows how often we choose to seek first our own kingdom and to hallow our own name and to do our own will, but He sees us in Christ, the One who came and always did the will of the Father, even when it meant worldly failure. May we all relax and rejoice in Him, for that is God's will for us!

Discussion Questions

1. Define God's will of decree, will of desire, and will of direction.
2. What is the traditional approach to knowing (or finding) God's will for your life and how is that different from the Biblical approach the approach discussed in this training session?
3. Jerry Sittser states, "We do not, therefore, need to fret when we have to make big decisions about the future, worrying about the terrifying possibility that we might miss God's will for our lives. We simply need to do what we already know in the present. God has been clear where clarity is most needed. The choices we make every day - to love a spouse after an argument, to treat an unkind co-worker with respect, to serve food at a soup kitchen- determine whether or not we are doing the will of God. If we have a problem it is not lack of knowledge; rather it is our unwillingness to respond to the knowledge we have." Do you see this playing out in your life. Give one example.

4. I Thes. 5:16-18 states, “rejoice always, pray continually, and give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” In light of this text and others we learned in this training session that the, “The problem isn’t knowing God’s will, the problem is doing God’s will.” Share your thoughts.
5. What is the upstream choice you must make before you come to a fork in the river of life that will determine whether or not you make the right choice and “find the will of God?”
6. The traditional approach to knowing whether or not you have made the right choice and are living according to God’s will is by worldly success. Why is this problematic and what is a better way to think about how worldly success and failure relate to God’s will?