

Training Session 7: The Foundation: Knowing the Will of God (Downstream)

Objective

Equip you to know God's will for your life

Key Texts

Psalm 37:4; Proverbs 16:9; Ephesians 4:11-12

Bible Study

What is it that God put me on earth to do? What does He want me to do with my life? Should I start a new business? Should I begin taking yoga lessons? Big decisions, small decisions. Does God care? If so, how do I know what He wants me to do? As we consider the foundational elements of building a life that endures, very few things eclipse the fundamental question we all ask, "Is this God's will for my life?"

Last week, we looked at the decision that is before the decision or the fork that is before the fork in the road. The big idea is that we all have a fundamental, upstream choice to make with our life that will determine any downstream choice we make. We all must decide whether we will imperfectly seek first the kingdom of God or not.¹ If we make 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 as we orient our choice toward Christ and His kingdom. If your heart is to honor and please God, you can't make a bad decision. If you're truly seeking God, then the will of God will be worked out in and through the decisions you make.

Let me summarize the big idea from last week with a story I hope will crystallize what we learned. My daughter Milly flew by herself from San Diego to Alabama to see her grandparents when she was in fourth grade. As God would have it, storms rocked the Southeast the day my daughter was to fly, and her flight was cancelled. Things were so delayed that the woman at the counter said the best she could do would be 2 days later. Predictably, tears came streaming down my fourth-grade daughter's face because she was really looking forward to spring break with her grandparents, but there was nothing they could do. Milly and Bradford, who were both bummed, quickly figured out they weren't the only ones. A Liberian woman, who was fairly distraught, came up to them and said, "Ma'am, listen, please help me. I need to find Delta office. I am lost and need help."

Now, if I were there with my daughter, I feel sure I would have been in a frenzied flight-cancelled mode, where it basically is survival of the fittest and everyone is elbowing everyone else out of the way to get on the first flight out. There is a problem in front of me, let's solve it. That's how most of us view life. Put out fires, solve problems. That's what we do at work. We get trained in this mentality. Life is about conquering and accomplishing and putting out fires, and none of those things are bad. God has put us on the earth to gain dominion, which involves conquering and solving problems and putting out fires. But let's be honest. We often miss so much of what God wants for us in the present because we're so concerned about fixing the present and controlling the future. In this case, getting Milly on the first available flight. Make it happen!

Not my wife. She was attentive to God's will in the moment. God says, "*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels*" (Hebrews 13:2). Pretty sure I've missed lots of angels. Or take it up a notch. Matthew 25:40 says, "*Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters, you did for me.*" For me. For Jesus himself. What this means is that the Liberian woman was actually so much more than just another woman, but as Mother Teresa says, she was "Jesus in His most distressing disguise."² Friends, here's the reality: the will of God for us is to become less obsessed with ourselves, putting out fires, solving problems, figuring out the future and more obsessed with loving Jesus, especially in His most distressing disguises. If we put into practice God's expressed will of desire in the present, then God's will of direction for our future becomes known to us.

My wife nailed it with my daughter. She instinctively said to the Liberian woman whose name was Cecelia, "We can help you," even though doing so would disadvantage Milly and place her further back in the queue. This decision was formed years earlier having studied God's expressed will of desire (for those in distress). Having marinated in it for years, there really was no decision to make.

Yes, you object, but we can't always help every person that is in front of us. True enough, but I think it's safe to say most of us can help far more than we think we can. Moreover, the decision to help or not to help is ALWAYS mingled with the demands of life and fires to put out and business all around. It requires great wisdom and a sensitivity to the Spirit to learn when the Spirit is leading you to help or not to help. As you begin, a good rule is to say yes to widows and orphans in distress when you are in doubt.

As my wife offered to help, Cecilia said, "Well, with all of these changes in flights, I just don't know what to do. I was supposed to fly to Atlanta and now it is going to be days and I am so tired and I just don't feel well." My wife responded, "What is wrong? Do you have a cold?" "No," she said, "I have cancer and I had to fly to San Diego and cross the border to get chemo treatments and stay in a hotel in Tijuana for 2 months. Now I'm heading back and I'm so tired and I don't know what to do." My wife said, "First of all, if they can't help you with a hotel, we will. You will stay at our house tonight." This is what I love so much about being married to my wife. I got no call on this. 17 years into marriage, you just know each other.

Bradford saw a man with a Delta employee badge standing against the wall and headed over with Milly and Cecilia and explained Cecilia's situation. He is touched, obviously, and wants to help, but realized this situation was over his authority level. The flights are booked. But he saw the guy in a red coat and said, "This guy. If anyone can help, it's him." He flagged down the red-coated savior who came over and waved his wand and, suddenly, a seat on a flight appeared that wasn't available earlier.

After he finished setting up Cecilia, my wife said, "My daughter also got bumped and really wants to see her grandparents. Is there any way there is another seat?" And he said, "You bet there is." And my daughter watched the wonders of God at work, not in some karmic way, but just seeing her mommy follow Jesus. Sometimes it ends up with earthly blessings (like a seat on the next plane), sometimes not, but, regardless, friends, this is disciple-making at its finest. My daughter was discipled by her mom in a way that no sermon will ever come close to touching. She watched her mom do the will of God in the present. Her mom was far less concerned with fixing Milly's future and far more concerned with faithfulness to God's expressed will of desire in the present to love widows in distress. As we said last week, the way we know God's will of direction for our future is by doing God's expressed will of desire in the present.

Now, some of you object, “Pastor Stephen, I have to decide whether to marry this guy or not and I’m just not sure. I have to decide which school to put my kids in or if I should sell my house? How do I know the will of God?” A. W. Tozer said, “The man or woman who is wholly or joyously surrendered to Christ can’t make a wrong choice—any choice will be the right one.” You respond, “OK, I get it, that is what you said last week, but can you please give me some practical, Biblical guidance on a process for making decisions.”

Yes, I’m going to give you 3 things to consider with an easy acronym to remember when it comes to calling and knowing the will of God: DOA. I’m convinced you are DOA—dead on arrival—if you don’t understand calling and how to discern the will of God. Calling, my friends, is what teleports you from the world of collecting a paycheck into a kingdom endeavor whereby you are called by the God of the universe to accomplish His purposes in the world through your work. One is child’s play, the other is cosmic restoration. So let’s learn how to hear God’s voice calling us to certain things in the world in order to accomplish His will.

Desires

We’ll start with a simple, but critical, question, “Do you have a *God-given* desire to do it?” Notice the question is not, “Do I feel like doing this?” Nor is the right question, “Do I have a desire to do this?” Jesus did not feel like going to the cross. In fact, He asked three times, “Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me.”³ After a deafening silence from His Father, Jesus responds with a statement upon which the fate of all mankind hinged, “Yet not as I will, but as you will.” Some translations say, “Not as I want, but as you want.” Jesus wanted, or desired, what the Father wanted more than what He wanted. He submitted to His Father’s desire and allowed the Father’s desire to become His desire, even if it wasn’t going to feel good.

A great starting point and seminal verse for understanding how to develop and discern the Father’s desires is Psalm 37:4, which states, *‘Delight yourself in the LORD and he will give you the desires of your heart.’* When you delight in the Lord, this doesn’t mean you are entering into a quid pro quo whereby He is obligated to give you all the things you want, such as a new car and a job promotion. No, when you begin to delight in the Lord, He will begin to give you the delights (or desires) of His heart. The desires of your heart will become new desires, desires that are His. Therefore, when the Bible says “he will give you the desires of your heart,” it means he will literally gift you with His desires.

As we delight in the Lord we will begin to experience new desires and we must learn to trust them and act on them with the confidence that God is leading us through them. If you are a young Christian, this might be challenging because you feel like your desires have led you down the wrong path and now you are trying to live differently. Yet, as you mature in Christ and He becomes the focus of your affection and adoration, you must learn to trust the newly implanted desires of your heart. While it is true that “the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick,” it is also true that Christ is a Good Shepherd and a Great Physician and is redemptively at work healing your heart with his desires.⁴ When we treasure Christ, our heart and its desires will follow.

How does this relate to decisions that we make? When I was working as a lawyer, I would come home drained. One of the ways I knew God wasn’t calling me to be a lawyer over the long haul was that I didn’t have a passion for the practice of law. Colossians 3:23 says, “Whatever you do, do it heartily, as unto the Lord.” Heartily means literally to “put your soul” into your work.

Picture John Coltrane on the sax with eyes closed letting it rip--that is putting your soul into your work! While it is possible in the short run to grind it out doing something for which you have zero passion, it is extremely difficult to put your soul into work that you are not passionate about over the long run.⁵ Moreover, think about how much more creative and fruitful you are when you are doing work you love.

Neil Doshi and Lindsay McGregor, in *Primed to Perform*, point out the inescapable link between motivation, success, and play (what we have been referring to as desires or passions). The authors, drawing on the research of hundreds of human performance experts, show that the research unequivocally proves that “direct motives (of play, purpose, and potential) typically increase performance...The more directly connected the motive is to the activity itself, the better performance becomes. Play is the motive that is closest to the work itself, so it is the most powerful.”⁶

Think about the significance of that statement. This means that having a desire (what Doshi calls play) is the most powerful motivating factor on the planet in creating what the author calls total motivation (or TOMO). For a follower of Christ, the TOMO factor increases exponentially knowing that the desire inside of us for the work isn't just our desire but is a God-given desire, hard-wired into us by the Creator of the universe to glorify and enjoy Him.

Doshi goes on to conclude, “*You're most likely to lose weight--or succeed in any other endeavor--when your motive is play. Play occurs when you're engaging in an activity simply because you enjoy doing it. The work itself is its own reward.*”⁷ Imagine it. You underwrite loans because you are functioning out of a God-given desire to love and value people by settling them in homes. The work itself becomes its own reward. Not the paycheck, but the work, is the reward. You coach soccer because of a God-given desire to love and value young girls and boys and see them flourish in life and develop rock-solid character. The work, not the win, becomes the reward. Game-changer!

Now, I want to be careful here. There are many times when work is work, or, put in Biblical terms, you feel the thorns and thistles of work that is painful toil (Genesis 3:17-19). When I counsel people about their satisfaction at work and how it relates to calling, I give them the 70/30 rule. If you enjoy 60-70% of what you do, then praise God! In any job, at least 30% of your work will be things that simply need to get done (like email!), regardless of whether you are passionate about the particular task or not. Yet, the goal is that somewhere close to 70% of your work would be done with what Frederick Buechner calls a deep gladness. Buechner states, “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet.”⁸ In mentioning the world's deep hunger, Buechner leads us to the second criteria to consider when discerning God's will: opportunities.

Opportunities

What Buechner describes as the world's deep hunger could also be stated as a God-given opportunity to join Him in His work of renewing all things (Revelation 21:5). Proverbs 16:9 describes this well: “*A man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps.*” Opportunity is one of the central ways that the Lord determines our steps, by opening or closing doors in a place of need in the world. Paul articulates this well in Colossians 4:3, “*pray for us...that God may open a door for our message...*” That, my friends, is what God does—He opens doors that we can't open and He shuts doors that we wouldn't or couldn't shut on our own.

What you will find is that God often makes His will most clearly known through closed doors, such as he did for Paul in Acts. Acts 16:6 says, “*Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the word in the province of Asia.*” Here you have an example of God closing a door of opportunity, even though Paul had a deep desire to do this and the world was hungering for it. Sometimes, we stand with broken hearts in front of God’s closed door, summoned to trust in a sovereign God whose ways are higher than our ways and thoughts are higher than our thoughts (Isaiah 55:9).

For example, getting passed over for a job that we feel perfect for is a closed door; asking a girl on a date and having her say no is a closed door. God may open these doors in the future and He may lead you to keep knocking on a door until it opens (remember the persistent widow in Luke 18), but a closed door is one way to help you discern God’s will for the present.

Finally, it must be noted that Satan can open doors (that we shouldn’t walk through) just as easily as God can close doors (that we shouldn’t try to kick down)! Generally, because of our deep love of comfort and pleasure, Christians are far too quick to give God the credit for opening the door when something good happens without discerning whether or not the open door really is from the Lord. Conversely, because of our disdain for suffering and anything that impinges on our comfort, we are far too quick to give Satan the credit when something bad happens without spiritually discerning who is opening or closing the door that is leading to hard things in our lives. Without question, Satan has a proven track record of offering huge sums of money that appear to promise perks, pay raises, power, and pleasure. He did so with Judas, who walked right through Satan’s open door and accepted the pay raise offered by the Pharisees (Matthew 26:15) without discerning who was behind it. He tried it with Jesus, who thankfully saw right through Satan’s open door and declined his offer of power, pleasure, and wealth (Mark 4). It takes great wisdom, spiritual-maturity, and a truth-telling Christian community to help us discern who is opening or closing the door of opportunity, which is the heart of this mentoring journey. These are skills we can’t develop apart from the Spirit working in life-on-life, Christ-centered community. Mentioning community leads us to our third criteria, because we have absolutely no shot to rightly discern our abilities apart from community.

Abilities

This is the third major piece—what God-given abilities do you have? Ordinarily, God works within the gifts He has supplied us. This is why a part of knowing God’s will involves a gift or ability assessment. Ephesians 4:11-12 says, “*And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ.*” The wording, as always, is intentional. Repeated over and over again, “He gave some as, and some as, and some as.” The clear teaching of Scripture here is be who you are. He gave you the gifts that enable you to do certain things naturally. Do those things, always with an eye towards the why behind the what--to love and value people by equipping them to serve the body of Christ and broader common good.

The natural assumption in Ephesians 4:11-12 (and throughout the Bible) is that you would step into the unique area in which God has gifted you. For example, in the book of Acts, some had teaching gifts and others had mercy gifts. Acts 6:2-3 states, “*It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables.*” The apostles had apostolic

gifts of teaching and preaching, and it would have been contrary to God's will for them to use these gifts to care for the poor (i.e to wait on tables--no, this isn't referring to restaurants!). Without question, caring for the poor through works of mercy and justice is a wonderful thing that is at the center of God's heart and these should flow out of all of our lives intermittently, but not in such a way that lead us to neglect the gifts that God has uniquely placed inside of us to equip the body to serve the common good.

Os Guinness, in *The Call*, puts it this way: he says most of us are what we do, which is why we're always asking the question, "Hey, what do you do?" Not surprisingly, our identity wraps around the axle of our job in this cultural milieu. Guinness flips the cultural script and says, "do what you are."⁹ Do what the Creator of the universe put inside of you to do, not to find your identity but because you already have a sure and certain identity in Him. Mozart had music inside of him that he alone had the ability to compose because God put it inside of him. While the Mozarts of the world are rare, God's gifts are not rare or rationed. "God has given each of you a gift from his great variety of spiritual gifts. Use them well to serve one another" (1 Peter 4:10). If you are a teacher, teach; if you are an organizer, organize. Do what you are!

"But," you object, "what about a gospel of weakness?" You build your case by stating, "God has always chosen to use people who lacked the necessary abilities so that He gets the glory. God called David (a young boy with a slingshot) to slay a giant; God called Moses (a guy who struggled with public speaking) to deliver a speech to Pharaoh." That is indeed all true, and God is free to do what God wants to do. He can choose to work through supernatural means if He wants, but that is precisely why they are called supernatural means. They aren't natural. Ordinarily, God chooses to work through ordinary means of gifts that He has given, which is why the famous line of Eric Liddell in *Chariots of Fire* resonates so deeply when he says, "God made me fast. And when I run, I feel God's pleasure." When you are doing something that God made you to do, you sense his pleasure and so do others around you.

Conversely, when you operate outside of your gifting and ability, it isn't pleasurable for you *or* others. I am a living example. When I was in sixth grade, I got cut from the band (at a very small school!). Then when I was in law school, I felt that God was calling me to lead worship because there was a discernible need at UVA. The academic, heady environment was, literally, hungering for it. That part I got right, but there was one small hurdle to overcome: I did not know how to play an instrument. Details, so I thought at the time. So I cast a vision for these gatherings and that vision became a reality. A few friends (who knew how to play instruments) jumped on board and the worship night was off and running, with hundreds of students filling the University Chapel and incredible works of the Spirit afoot.

I began taking guitar lessons and assumed I would pick it up pretty quickly, then jump on the guitar and lead UVA students into worship of King Jesus. In the interim, I joyfully informed the band that I had a bongo drum that I brought back from Africa and was ready to rock. So it began with me on the bongos. Slowly, but surely, I was demoted over the months. At the first meeting of the band, it was suggested that I might be a better fit on the tambourine, which wasn't altogether bad in my mind because it still had a little pop and panache. At the second meeting of the band, it was suggested that our sound would be improved if I played the pivotal role of.....egg shaker. While it wasn't exactly the same as the lead guitarist and vocalist I had envisioned, we all know how important the egg shaker is, so I played that egg with passion. As the third meeting of the band was called, things went about as far south as they could go when

the band suggested, “Stephen, we think you would be a better fit on the overhead projector.” For the millennials reading this, overhead projectors were big back in the day, only they were not classified as instruments. They don’t make any noise, which was the point the band was trying to make!

Did God call me to lead worship? Yes, but certainly not in the role I initially envisioned, which is often the case in life. Could God have chosen to supernaturally supercharge my vocals and guitar-playing ability to lead people into worship? He’s God and can do what He pleases, but ordinarily He works through the ordinary gifts he places inside us that are recognized by others and cultivated with time and practice. Malcolm Gladwell famously stated, “ten thousand hours (of practice) is the magic number of greatness.”¹⁰ And, honestly, this is why community is so important. There are times when we think more highly than we should of our abilities, or on the other hand, we downplay our abilities. This is where community comes in. “Stephen, don’t spend 10,000 hours practicing the guitar and singing. God put other things inside of you. Spend 10,000 hours doing what He put inside of you.” We need friends like this, often to help us discern what it is that is inside of us, far more than we need a sign written in the sky!

In summary, there is no shortcut to knowing God’s will. It flows out of knowing Jesus and pressing in to Jesus, not asking for a sign.¹¹ Why? Because in Jesus you have one who had a God-given desire to follow His Father’s will. In Jesus, you have one who had the ability to follow His will perfectly, without exception and without flaw. And so, when He was presented with the God-given opportunity to follow God’s will for Him to go to the cross so that He could redeem all of us who haven’t followed God’s will for our lives, He said “Yes, I’m all in.” This is why He said in John 6:38, “*For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me.*” It all begins with Jesus—to know God’s will is to know Him and grow in Him and allow Jesus to make true in your life what was true in His.

Discussion Questions

1. What impacted you most in this training session?
2. What is the right question to ask yourself when it comes to desires and knowing the will of God? What is the wrong question? Discuss.
3. Do you find yourself skeptical or trusting of your desires when it comes to knowing God’s will?
4. How do you discern whether God or Satan is opening or closing the door?
5. Based on Ephesians 4:11-12, we discussed doing what you are by doing the things that God has naturally gifted you to do. Describe in 3 or 4 bullet points what those things are for you and allow your group to speak into this.

Love Does:

The goal is to be doers of the word, not just hearers of the word. What is one thing you could do every day in the next week to do the will of God?

Endnotes

1. I say imperfectly because none of us will perfectly seek first the kingdom of God, but rather the fundamental orientation and desire of our heart is to seek first His kingdom even though we don't always live that out perfectly.
2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ECmHhwfRDPM>
3. Matthew 26:36-46
4. John 10:11, Mark 2:15-17
5. Admittedly, many people in the world today are not afforded the blessing of even considering this question. If you find yourself on the bottom of Maslow's famous pyramid depicting humanity's hierarchy of needs, then the question of passion and desire isn't one that you are asking because life is about survival. Doing the will of God in this scenario becomes less about making the correct choice among a plethora of options based upon the desires of your heart and more about making the often difficult choice to approach suffering and hardship with a faith that enables you to "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).
6. Neel Doshi and Lindsay McGregor, *Primed to Perform: How to Build the Highest Performing Cultures through the Science of Total Motivation*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2015) 13.
7. Doshi and McGregor, 7.
8. Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*, (San Francisco: HarperCollins San Francisco, 1993), 118-119.
9. Os Guinness, *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life*, (Nashville: W Publishing Group, 2003, 45.
10. Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success*, (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2008), Chapter 2.
11. Knowing Jesus (and His will) happens through prayer. Prayer isn't mentioned in this lesson, but it is absolutely assumed and essential in learning to do God's will. This is why we first began with training sessions on prayer and then moved to an application of prayer in learning to follow God's will.