

How to Know God's Will

Romans 12:2

March 1, 2020
Steve DeWitt

We are going to get to Romans 12 here in a moment. Before I do, a word about Christians and coronavirus. I'm sure you are all aware of what's going on in the world with this new virus. I'm not here to give any medical assessment; that's not my area of expertise. But this, like everything else, is something to be considered through our faith and according to Scripture. We are hardly the first Christians living with something like this. Plagues and disease and threats of illness or death was much more part of everyday life for past Christians in past centuries than for us. If you look at history, you will find that the consistent Christian response in the midst of war or plague is remarkable. When plague comes, while the populous freaks out, Christians, in general, don't. We don't give in to fear but live by faith while serving those in need. In fact, that is going on in Wuhan, China right now. I recently read this headline:

The Response of Wuhan Christians puts Government to Shame: *They Continue to Evangelize and Help One Another*

This was written by a reporter on the ground in Wuhan praising the Christians. They continue to be out and sharing the gospel. Here is a picture of what they are handing out:



So, what are we doing here at Bethel? We are looking at prudent steps for our church to continue to function if things get worse. We aren't going to freak out. Why? As Christians, our things and our lives are the Lord's. We are going to be steady and faithful and prudent and missional. Who knows how God might use this in our lives and in our community? People thinking about the fleeting nature of life and the reality of death is a good thing for what

really matters in the end. Maybe God will use it to bring revival to our nation. So, let's make sure we approach this latest world crisis as God would have us and let's show a freak-out world the difference Jesus makes when the chips are down.

Now to Romans 12 and how to know God's will for your life. Romans 12 urges us to approach this question in a way far better than all the hunches, fleeces, divine nudges, I-felt-God-tell-me, crystal balls, fortune cookies, horoscopes, or any other approach.

This is our third message drawn from Romans 12:1-2. The first focused on verse 1 and this wonderful ethical transition from the deep gospel truths of Romans 1-11 to *what difference should this make in our lives?* Paul's answer: everything! God's miracle of justification makes us right positionally before God. But this is just the beginning, as God intends to make us righteous in practice, in the way we live.

Our second message was from verse 2, "*Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind*" (Romans 12:2 ESV). Non-conformity to the world is non-conformity to the way the world thinks, and therefore, to the way the world lives. We

all live according to the way we think. *"For as he thinks in his heart, so is he."* (Proverbs 23:7 NKJV). Our lives reveal our thoughts and our thinking reveals our true values and priorities. In verse 2, godly thinking is called a renewed mind. We renew our minds by saturating our minds with God's Word. We literally train our minds to think rightly, biblically, and truthfully. There are many wonderful by-products of thinking biblically. Paul focuses on one we all very much want—confidence in God's will for decision making. Here is how he says it:

"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." (Romans 12:2 ESV)

I want you to look at the word "that." It is a conjunction and it means "so that as a result." Here in Romans 12:2, be transformed by the renewal of your mind, so that as a result, you will discern the will of God. It is critical to see the last part of verse 2 (which we all desperately want) as the result of the first part of verse 2 (which we may easily overlook).

The ESV translates this, *"that by testing you may discern what is the will of God."* Test and discern. The idea is like a jeweler. My wife and I were travelling some years ago and we found a gold ring. We didn't know if it was real gold or not, nor its value. So, I took it to a jeweler. They had ways of testing to see if it was actual gold. If yes, then we could expect a smile and an offer of some money. If not, no smile, no money. Test and approve what? The will of God. Here we are on a point of great confusion among Christians, which has led to some pretty awful misunderstandings and approaches to life's decisions. Which will of God is he talking about?

The Secret Will of God

This is sometimes known as the decreed, eternal will of God, or the sovereign will of God.

"In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will." (Ephesians 1:11)

This aspect of the sovereignty and eternity of God means that from God's perspective, there is one way all things will work out. It is all according to his will. Paul makes this point in Romans 8 and 9. Since God is loving and good, we can rest in knowing that God is in control. He's got this. Even Satan cannot thwart the eternal will of God. God will fulfill all his promises. Nothing surprises him. Everything is according to his will.

How does this relate to the question, *how can I know God's will for my life?* Romans 12:2 is not talking about this aspect of God's will. We cannot know God's eternal will. Only God knows it. Some people approach God's will like it's a hidden mystery that we have to discover before making some decision. No. Romans 12:2 is about the other side of God's will...

The Revealed Will of God

Here's the good news. Everything God expects us to know and that we need to know he has already told us in his Word. God's Word is God's will. The Bible is God's will for our lives.

- *"His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence."* (2 Peter 1:3)

- "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." (2 Timothy 3:16-17)

What guidance do we find in Scripture? Moral and ethical guidance with specific commands. Real people examples from the Old Testament and the New Testament. The inspirational example of Jesus' life. The overarching purpose of God in creation, fall, redemption, and consummation. God's goal through the gospel to change us into the likeness of Christ. Big overarching priorities for our lives like God's glory, the fame of Jesus' name, the advancement of the gospel and kingdom of God, and qualities like loving God and loving neighbor.

You might be thinking, *I don't need help with those things, I'm trying to decide what college to go to. What person should I marry? What career should I have? Should I buy a Ford or a Honda? We cry out, God, won't you please guide me? Starbucks or Dunkin Donuts? I need to know!*

God's revealed won't tell you the answer to those things. In fact, 99% of the daily decisions we make have little to do with direct moral commands of Scripture. Most guidance in life, most decisions we make—what we really need is God's wisdom.

Wisdom on the Street Level of Life

Wisdom. What is wisdom? **Wisdom is the ability to discern the best choice for the best outcome.** C.S. Lewis called this "sanctified common sense." There are entire books of the Bible called wisdom literature, Proverbs most notably. Practical Christian living. Christian wisdom has different outcomes in view than worldly wisdom. In the world, decisions are made by what will make me the most money, most famous, most powerful, most whatever. For the Christian, the wisest way to live is in the way that pleases God the most and brings him glory.

God has so ordered the world that all human beings live in the midst of three circles of God's will (see diagram below):



The largest circle represents God's eternal or sovereign will, the next largest circle represents God's revealed will, and the innermost circle represents God's wisdom.

Why is this important? Because often people say, *I want to know God's will for my life.* Great! Read the Bible. *No, I mean, I have a decision to make and I'm not sure what God's will is.* Which will do you mean? Certainly not his secret will; you will never know that. Do you mean his revealed will? *Maybe.*

Let's say a woman is considering marrying a guy. I've had this conversation many times. *Pastor Steve, I'm in love.* OK. Tell me about him. *Well, he likes cats and he's great with kids. We like so many of the same movies and we can talk for hours.* Nothing you have said so far is important. *Susie, is he a growing Christian? I don't know. We haven't talked about that.* Really? Now I'm concerned about your priorities AND his. *Why?* It's never God's will for a Christian to marry a non-Christian. The Bible makes that clear. If he is a Christian, now this becomes a wisdom decision. Bill may love cats but hasn't held a job in 10 years. He may love cats, but he despises your sister. Or your family despises him. Or worse, maybe he's a Packer fan.... There are lots of deal-breakers out there. Within God's revealed will and parameters, who you marry is a wisdom decision. Once you marry them, you have fulfilled God's sovereign will.

Pastor Steve, so there isn't one soulmate out there for me? My one true love? Nope. There are hundreds of thousands of potential spouses who are within God's will. Do they love Jesus and want to be a biblical husband or wife? If yes, now it's a question of which one you want to marry. For this, we need God's wisdom. Did you know God encourages us to ask for it?

"If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him" (James 1:5). That is a great prayer when making decisions, *God I lack wisdom here. Would you please give it to me? Incline my heart toward what would be most pleasing to you.*

How do I find God's will? Ask, *does God's Word give definitive direction in this?* If yes, case closed. You don't have to think about it. Does God's Word give direction in principle? While it may not be clearly yes or no, the application of a biblical truth can be helpful. This is what Paul does in much of 1 Corinthians. The Corinthian Church was confused about many things including whether to take a fellow Christian to court or if Christians could eat meat offered to idols. Paul takes a truth like love your fellow brother and applies it to whether Christians can sue each other. In cases where God's Word is not entirely clear, we must objectively apply the clear truths to the less-than-clear situations.

But what if there is no clear biblical teaching that either prohibits or requires something or principled application that gives direction for God's will? Within that freedom we can make some really stupid decisions. I know; I have made them. So just because God's revealed will allows it, doesn't mean it's best. Immature Christians struggle with that distinction. They want to ask, "Can I?" The right question is, "Should I?"

God incentivizes us within his revealed will to live strategically—even deny ourselves—if it advances the gospel or helps God's kingdom. That's what sends Wuhan Christians into the streets in the midst of a pandemic. God promises to reward us forever. The parable of the talents and the minas are two examples of this.

Let's take this framework and look at Romans 12:2, *"Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect"* (Romans 12:2).

Our minds are *renewed* when I am looking at life this way through the lens of the Bible. In this, I'm valuing the priorities that God does. I am cultivating a holy instinct. The rest of the verse shows what a renewed mind looks like.

What Does a Renewed Mind Look Like?

1. Test what God's will is – know it

"That by testing you may discern what is the will of God."

I'm told the Secret Service teaches its agents to spot counterfeit money by carefully understanding what money is supposed to look like. God's revealed will in us allows us to test or evaluate decisions by knowing the truth. The opportunities of my life are evaluated with the first questions: *is this something that God's Word commands? Allows? Forbids? Encourages? Gives guidance on? What does God say on the matter?* That's the first step.

It begs the question, *how can you do this if you don't know God's revealed will?* The answer is that you can't. So, one obvious requirement is that God's people must be people of the Book—reading and meditating on God's Word; listening to its teachings through sermons or books. We have to know God's will to test things by God's will.

2. Discern and delight in God's will

"That by testing you may discern what is the will of God."

How many times have I heard someone described as "knows his Bible back and forth but..." finish the statement, *"he's not living it?"*

All the Bible knowledge in the world doesn't give you a renewed mind. It is the knowledge of God's will AND the delighting in it. Can you say today, *God I want what you want in my life?* Once I totally want what God wants, now my heart is ready to delight even in difficult decisions if it's according to God's will.

Good. Acceptable. Perfect. These adjectives are describing God's perspective on decisions we make according to his will, as if God is in heaven watching our lives and sending his approval. *Good decision, John. Sue, that pleases me! Well done!* Thus, our approval and doing of God's will leads to God's approval and delighting in our decisions.

Can you see the process here? I do not live according to the will of the world around me. I seek transformation of my life by renewing my mind with God's Word and renewing my heart to want his will, which produces decisions and lifestyle choices that fulfill his will, resulting in approval from God. To paraphrase Augustine, "Love God and do as you please."

Wait a second! Are you saying that God's will for my life is not a secret? That is exactly what I am saying. *I don't have to find God's will for my life?* Not if finding it means that God has hidden it from you. The process of knowing God's will for my life is more a matter of discernment than discovery.

A Few Approaches to Avoid

Fleece

The fleece approach comes from the story of Gideon in Judges 6. God told Gideon what to do. Gideon was unsure, so he asked God to cause a piece of fabric (fleece) to be completely dry and the ground around it wet, which God did to assure Gideon that he was with him in taking on the Midianites.

Many people have mistakenly thought, *it worked for Gideon, therefore it will work for me*. So, they set up some scenario whereby God can show them that this is the decision that they should make. *God, if you want to do such and such, then make this and that happen, and then I will do XYZ*. This is a really terrible way to approach things. Don't do it.

Peace

Many people evaluate the rightness or wrongness of something based on what they call "peace," so that the unquestionable proof of the right course is an inner feeling of tranquility about it. I have had people tell me they have peace to directly violate God's Word in a decision.

What is the "peace" they are talking about? A feeling. What is so inherently dangerous about our feelings? Our feelings change. They are so subjective. What people call peace tends to be whatever makes me feel happy, so we can find peaceful feelings for nearly anything we want.

Only one perfect will!

In my younger years I approached things this way. *If I make the wrong choice, then I'm forever out of God's will!* This approach leads to paralysis. Or worse, secondary decisions like when people say, *I'm unhappy in my marriage, so obviously I didn't marry the one God picked for me. I need to go find that special one God has for me!*

There is no single woman to marry, car to buy, college to attend, neighborhood to live in, church to go to (well that might be an exception). In all these, God gives parameters within which we can choose, and if we choose wisely, experience the blessings of wise living.

There are other flawed approaches, but let's make sure we get how God wants us to live as Christians, in view of God's mercy, with my life as an offering to God, loving the transformation God is doing in my life, renewing me to God-shaped thinking and valuing, living every day evaluating life's opportunities, and discerning in them the directions that would most please God and thereby most bless me.

Bethel Church, *"be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."* (Romans 12:2)

Scripture quotations are taken from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version. ESV® Permanent Text Edition® (2016)*. Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

Additional quotations are taken from the *New King James Version®*. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

© 2020 by Steve DeWitt. You are permitted and encouraged to reproduce and distribute this material in any format provided that: (1) you credit the author, (2) any modifications are clearly marked, (3) you do not charge a fee beyond the cost of reproduction, (4) you include Bethel's website address (www.bethelweb.org) on the copied resource.