

Discovering God's Will Without Losing Yours

Lesson 7

GROW DISCIPLESHIP CURRICULUM

Engaging the Learner

An amalgam of the acrid smell of insect repellent and sweat, the buzz of electric lights, and the inadvertent crackle of a bad PA system formed the backdrop for my junior high youth camp experience. At 8:30 in the evening, the Arkansas heat still hung tight around us. Having made our way through three “fun” songs (apparently “fun” denoted the use of motions) and a handful of hymns, the youth speaker began to preach. It was Thursday evening, the last night of camp. In years to come I would learn this signaled the what-are-you-gonna-be-when-you-grow-up/God's-got-a-perfect-plan-for-your-life talk. But I was in seventh grade and wouldn't acquire this knowledge until my fifteenth year. So, unwarned and unprepared, I settled in for a forty-five minute treatise on God's will.

There, in a “gymernacle” (an ingenious hybrid of “gym” and “tabernacle”) on the North Arkansas Nazarene campground, I first conceived that God had my life perfectly laid-out for me. Every decision contained a right answer and a wrong one. Every opportunity offered a chance to prove my obedience or throw my life away like the heathen. “It's so easy,” explained the speaker's stage whisper, “to wander out of God's will and never find your way back. Don't you want to know God's will for you? Don't you want to be happy? Don't you want to live forever in His kingdom? Why don't you come to the altar and find God's will for your life.” *I wanted to be happy. I wanted to live forever in God's Kingdom. I even wanted to know God's will for my life!* In a virtual sprint, I hit the altar and commenced to praying. However, the expected diagrams and datelines didn't materialize on the back of my clinched eye-lids. No voice from heaven thundered or even whispered the name of my occupation, future city of residence, or bride-to-be. Finally, despondent and a little ashamed, I made my way back to my seat.

Years would pass before I would grasp that God's will doesn't often descend on tablets of stone or hover in front of us like a hologram. Instead, we catch glimpses during times of prayer, garner occasional insights from Bible study, and hear God's words of guidance from spiritual advisors and Christian friends. God accepted my commitment to Him at that little Arkansas altar and then began the process of molding a stubborn, prideful boy into a doer of His will. Ultimately, God's will for our lives is not so much about particular locations, spouses, and occupations as about openness, obedience, humbleness, and Christian living.

Exploring the Lesson

God's Will is Practical to Daily Life

“God's will.” The term can sound so grandiose that sometimes we forget His will begins with our daily life—our habits and practices. For instance, do you catch every film coming out of Hollywood, no matter the content? Are Tuesday and Thursday nights reserved for doing things with the guys? Verse 15 reminds us of the importance of how we live. “Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise, but as wise.” Far from being relegated to “important” people and things such as nations, pastor's, and occupation choices, God's will relates to you personally, in your everyday walk. The wise Christian will grasp this truth, search for God's will, and apply it to his or her life.

Once a Christian knows God's will, life is full of purposeful activity. Imagine having a basis for ordering your life—from the small decisions to the big ones. Constant fretting about wasted time, wrong choices, and missed opportunities cease. That's because God's will is always about your future, never about your past. Life becomes worth living because you know where you are going. And speaking of where you're going, Matthew 7:21 tells us, in doing God's will, we are going to heaven.

Self-Discipline Required

Let's break down verse 15 even further. "Be very careful, then, how you live." Following God's will is not always easy. This passage warns us to be "very careful" how we live. Wanting to do God's will is not enough. Jesus reminds us in Matthew 7:21 that many people who say to him 'Lord, Lord;' will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Only those who do His Father's will. You must commit to follow God's will through a careful consideration how you live. Once you make that commitment, determination and perseverance become necessities.

When Opportunity Knocks

" Making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil" (5:15). On your spiritual journey, as you learn to follow God's will, God will give you opportunities to make right decisions. These opportunities are for your good, allowing you to practice listening for God's voice and exercising your ability to follow Him. Remember, God's will is not restrictive nor does it consist of a confining enforcement of laws. He will never take away our freedom to choose, even our freedom to choose a life apart from Him. Instead, God gives us the opportunity to make right decisions for our own benefit. He has our good at heart. Occasionally, God provides a chance for advancement or success. How do you respond? By seeking God's will or trying to determine the best course on your own?

God Wants You to Know His Will

Verse 17 reads, "Therefore, do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is." God wants to communicate His will to you. He does not tease His children by withholding direction for our lives. As the rest of Ephesians shows, God's will can be learned. The following sections will deal with aspects of learning God's will. It's important to note that Scripture is one of the primary ways God conveys His will. Often, Christians make the mistake of believing whatever happens in their or others' lives is God's will. This is not true. God never wills evil to happen, but He can work through bad times and bad situations to make us stronger. The key to following God's will is to learn God's plan in an area and then work with God to meet His goals. Ephesians discloses God's will in several areas. Let's examine these.

Avoid Evil

Doing God's will means avoiding sin. This reminds us of the importance of wisdom. Wisdom in following God's will is clearly seen in Ephesians 5:18. "Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery." Debauchery means immoral or sinful living. Few would argue with the statement that drinking heavily often proceeds immoral behavior. An important part of following God's will is not beginning down a road that leads to sinful living. So, wisdom tells us not to drink heavily, if at all, because sin is never a part of God's will. This includes the notion that a good end justifies a sinful means.

Be Filled with God's Spirit

Being filled with the Holy Spirit is critical for learning God's will for several reasons. First, God conveys His will through His Spirit. Second, the more control the Spirit has, the more apt you are to know His Will. Third, God's Spirit actually provides the strength to enable you to do God's will. Finally, the Holy Spirit gives a discerning mind to discover God's will in difficult situations.

Learn to be Happy in God's Will

Ephesians 5:19 tells us, "Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord." We are to celebrate God's will in our lives for a variety of reasons. Romans 12:2 informs us that God's will is "good, pleasing, and perfect." There is no finer place to be in all of life than in God's will. Because God has your best welfare in mind, there is no need to dread or fear your future. This confidence in knowing and following His will results in music of the heart.

Be a Thankful Person

Finally, it is God's desire to transform us into thankful people. Verse 20 instructs the reader, "Always give thanks to God the Father for everything." God wishes to foster in us the art of showing appreciation. Once we understand the personal attention God gives each of us within His will, we cannot help but realize how much we have to thank God for.

Enhancing Our Lives

The following exercises are aimed at developing your ability to determine and live within God's will.

1. Current Diagnosis. We'll begin with a couple of questions to see where you are.
 - A. Christ is our example of God's highest will. What things do you do that Jesus did?
 - B. How has your personal relationship with God made a change in you? Consider your attitudes, actions, and conversations.

2. Employing Self-Discipline.
 - A. Begin by making up your mind to do God's will.
 - B. Next, develop your plans. Put these on paper and refer back to them regularly. You may even want to set up a schedule.
 - C. Set an evaluation date(s). Place these times of evaluation on your calendar or computer.
 - D. Pray for strength and courage to carry out God's will. God's will isn't always easy, but He's promised to strengthen us for the task.
 - E. Share your plans with a Christian friend or accountability partner.
 - F. Accept achievement as God's approval, while understanding failure as an opportunity for growth.

3. Making the Most of Opportunities. When granted an opportunity to do God's will, evaluate the situation much as you would an assignment at work.
 - A. Think creatively. Consider all the possibilities. Brainstorm with friends.
 - B. Approach the opportunity positively. You know God will strengthen you. You know you have the opportunity to grow. You know God will not call you to an opportunity you can't handle.
 - C. Prepare for opportunities by asking this question: If I were to dream of the perfect opportunity, what would it be?

4. But How Do I Know God's Will? A quick review from the lesson:
 - A. God reveals His will to us through a variety of ways:
 1. His Word
 2. People who teach truthfully about God
 3. Circumstances around us
 4. Impressions upon our minds
 - B. God's will is never contrary to:
 1. What He says in the Bible
 2. What He is like and who He is
 3. Sound ethical principles
 4. Logical thinking

5. Avoiding Evil. A cornerstone to living in God's will is avoiding evil. Sin will derail your plans and lead to a defeatist attitude.
 - A. Paul testified that he kept his "body in subjection." Are there natural needs and desires to be careful of? What are they?

B. Many temptations lose their powerful attraction once you decide you will not give in to them. Do you need to make that strong decision about any areas right now?

6. Commit Yourself to Happiness and Thankfulness.

A. Do something that brings you joy and happiness regularly.

B. Write down a good thing God has done for you. Share this item with a friend.

C. Write a note of thanksgiving to God.

D. Phone two friends and thank them for what they mean to you.

Outline for Small Group Discussion or Personal Reflection

All questions and exercises are useful for either personal or small group reflection. While exercises marked with an asterisk (*) are written specifically for a small group leader, individual learners can easily modify the exercise for their personal study.

Engaging the Learner

Take a moment to re-read the opening story. Did you have a similar belief that God has your life planned out for you? What is your understanding of the nature of God's will?

Exploring the Lesson/Enhancing Your Life

*Ask someone to read Galatians 5:15-20 to the class.

God's Will is Practical to Daily Life

Where do you see yourself going in life?

What habits and practices you currently engage in will you need to change in order to be in God's will?

When Opportunity Knocks

*Ask individuals in the class to name opportunities and choices they are currently considering. Write these opportunities on a chalk board/dry erase board. Then, as a class, look at the opportunities. Ask, "Have you prayed for God's will in these areas?" Evaluate each in terms of possible biblical perspectives, as well as Christian advice from others in the class.

God Wants You to Know His Will

Is everything that happens in your life God's will?

Can God's will for your life be learned? How?

Avoid Evil

Do you need to give up anything to "avoid evil"? Is it okay to do something sinful in order to reach someone for Christ? Why or why not?

*Divide your class into pairs. Have persons determine an area in their lives they need to become disciplined in. As a team, develop and write down a plan for self-discipline in these areas. Determine

measurable goals for evaluating success. Set dates for evaluating these goals. Finish by praying for strength in these areas.

Learn to be Happy in God's Will

Why should we sing to God? Why should we not dread our future if we are in God's will?

Be a Thankful Person

*As a class, make a list of things you can thank God for from the previous week.

*Give each person in the class two small sheets of paper (1/4 sheet is fine). Ask class members to write something they appreciate about the person on their right and the person on their left on each piece of paper. Take a moment to trade the pieces of paper.