

Finding God's Will

By Pastor Andy Aikens

If any person boasts that he loves the Divine Law, and yet neglects the study of it, and applies his mind to other things, he betrays the grossest hypocrisy; for the love of the law...always produces continual meditation upon it.

-John Calvin, concerning Psalm 119:97

There are two ways to bake a potato. You can bake it in a microwave oven or you can bake it in a conventional oven. If you bake it in a microwave oven it will be ready to eat in much less time than if you cook it in a conventional oven. The difference is about 8 minutes to one hour. However, I have found that you will sacrifice two important aspects of a good baked potato. First, the skin will be wrinkled, having a much more rubbery texture than its conventional oven counterpart. Second, the inside of the potato will be less flaky. The inside of a microwaved potato seems to be heavier. A potato baked in a conventional oven has a skin that is almost crispy, but not quite, and it certainly is not chewy. The insides of a baked potato cooked in a conventional oven are light and fluffy. In fact, the only drawback to the conventional oven is that it takes so long, but for those who love good baked potatoes the wait is worth the trouble. Reaching maturity in the Christian life is often treated like a microwave oven experience. We desire to reach maturity, and we desire those we disciple to reach maturity very quickly. But the Bible and experience confirm that obtaining the wisdom of maturity in the Christian faith is a conventional oven experience. It takes time. Wisdom is not attained overnight. If we seek the microwave experience we will have the results of a microwave experience, but if we will commit the time that is necessary we can have a conventional oven experience with all its benefits. The positive results of a conventional oven experience far outweigh the time saved by the microwave experience, and this is true for both potatoes and Christians.

This process of attaining the wisdom of maturity is called sanctification. As children of God, that is those redeemed by the blood of Christ, we are all engaged in the process of being made holy, which is sanctification. One of the central pieces of wisdom that we attain in the process of sanctification involves understanding and obeying the will of God. All of us confront the need to know what God's will is. Any time a major life decision confronts a true child of God, he or she will ask, "what is God's will?"

Knowing the answer to that question is very freeing, but being confused about how to get the answer to that question is enslaving. We have been led to believe by many teachers that the will of God is mysterious. If you have had similar experiences to me, you have probably been made to feel that God is hiding from you.

It is a common sentiment among the immature that God only reveals himself to the truly sincere and truly committed. This is not true. There are no secrets in Christianity. All the revelation we need has been given in God's word. He is not hiding from his children. God does not play games with the redeemed.

However, if you do not understand this, then it is easy to get confused. There are so many voices speaking today on the subject of spiritual guidance that it is a task just to sift through all the material.

But I have good news for you. God's voice has spoken, and that voice has been recorded in the pages of scripture. We need look no further; we only need to steady ourselves for the long process of sitting under that Word so as to be shaped and molded by its knowledge, wisdom and understanding for life. I would go so far as to say that the Word of God is the will of God.

The reason I say this is because God is more concerned about the character of your life than He is the path of your life. God is concerned about where you work, where you live and even about where you recreate, but He is more concerned about your character. The reason He is more concerned with our character is that when our character reflects the holiness of God, we are less prone to choose to do those things in life that are outside His will. Said another way, in order to walk the path of blessing we must be trained in righteousness. God has designed us to be holy. The scriptures are clear that pursuing holiness is the will of God. 1 Thessalonians 4:3 says, "It is God's will that you should be sanctified." And, five times in Scripture (Leviticus 11:44; 19:2; 20:7; Matthew 5:48; and 1 Peter 1:15-16) we read the command, "be holy because God is holy." Therefore, if you are facing a difficult decision, the best way to get a compass reading on which direction to go is to consider how to be holy. This won't answer all questions directly, but it will be an infallible way to begin.

Many Christians have been misled in this area of spirituality because of fellow Christians. I have often heard people say things like, "God told me," or "God spoke to me." I don't think the majority of these folks intend to mislead anyone. But the truth is that comments like these do give the wrong impression about what is actually happening.

Submitting to a more Biblical process

When Christians use phrases like "God told me," they are really trying to describe a process that they may not even be aware of. How does a person reach the conclusion that they should take one course of action versus another? Succinctly, how does anyone make a decision? The short and the small of it is, you think.

Thinking is a process we are no longer trained in. However, it is a process we do regardless of training. The difference is that we will either do it well, or we will do it poorly.

The process of thinking begins with shaping influences.¹ We have all been shaped by our experiences with God and circumstances. Circumstances range from family to teachers and include friends, coaches, enemies, events and places. Circumstances also include things like wealth and poverty, rural or urban living, whether or not your family attended church, and whether or not you had access to books. These influences help us to build principles that guide our

¹ Ted Tripp, [Shepherding a Child's Heart](#).

decisions. Every person has principles that they live by, and in an ideal situation Christians will have life principles that are shaped by God's Word.

When our thinking is shaped by God's word, we are trained in righteousness. This training occurs through all the hours of praying, Bible reading, listening to sermons and participating in Bible studies. This training gives us the wisdom to know what to do in most situations. However, there are times when ambiguity causes us to wonder what to do. In these moments it is important not to microwave the process. Rather, we must commit ourselves to the arduous task of reading the word, praying, and seeking Godly counsel until we are able to make a Biblically based decision that will glorify God.

Impressions of the heart and the voices in your head

Microwaving the process involves common misconceptions about how God speaks. These misconceptions look more like divination² than they do Biblical wisdom. I recently heard of a pastor who made the decision to leave one congregation to go to another based on a faulty way of reading the Bible. He came across 2 Timothy 4:6 where Paul says that he was about to depart. This pastor interpreted this to mean that God was speaking to him of his own need to depart his current position. However, in the passage Paul is speaking of his own death. This pastor's reading of the text took it to be a special word to him. This is very dangerous. It turns reading the Bible into a mystical experience that is far too subjective to be based on the truth. After hearing this story I was left wondering how he will interpret this passage the next time he reads it. Will he decide to leave again? The truth is we cannot rip texts out of their context and make them mean what we want them to mean.

It is far healthier to examine our hearts and understand our desires. The heart is a factory of desires.³ Some of them good and some of them wicked. The Bible must be our guide in sorting out whether our desires are good or bad. Some of these desires can be classified as impressions of the heart. A heart impression is a desire that will not leave our minds alone. We may not even be aware of the origin of the impression. Regardless, there are principles of righteousness that guide how we think through such a strong impression.

I was on a plane ride to Minnesota in 2000. The man sitting next to me was reading a liberal book about religion. He had long hair and an unkempt mustache. Everything about his appearance said that he was lost (you can see my biases at work). I got an overwhelming desire to witness to him. I got butterflies in my stomach and wondered if I should speak. In years gone by I would have taken this deeply emotional response and thought that it was a word from the Lord. But now I understand that this response in me is brought on by years of shaping influences. I don't think these emotions should be ignored. The shaping influences that stimulate these emotions are sometimes good. I have always been a part of very evangelical churches. I have been taught that we must share the gospel. The Word of God commands it. So, I scooted closer to

² Bruce Waltke, Finding the Will of God.

³ John Piper

the man and inquired about his reading. I began a conversation that quickly turned to talking about the things of the Lord. At the climax he revealed that he was a Christian, and a discipleship leader at Grace Community Church Sun Valley, California.

My impression was all wrong. I had not received a special word from God. Simply put, years of training in righteousness compelled me to do what was Biblical. I would do it again. Maybe next time the person will be lost, and Christ will gloriously save them.

This leads me to the second half of this section, voices in the head. Voices in the head are a result of the same phenomenon. That phenomenon is the dynamic process of thinking that is shaped by the dominate influences in our lives. I noticed early on in my walk with Christ that a voice was often speaking in my head. The problem is that the voice resembled my own. The other thing I noticed was that this voice could tell me to do righteous things one minute and unrighteous things the next, particularly when driving in traffic.

My favorite Disney movie for a long time was Pinocchio. In this story Jiminy Cricket acts as Pinocchio's conscience. He even sings a song that says, "let your conscience be your guide." The only problem with this advice is that one's conscience is not infallible. Yet, in many churches the "still small voice" carries with it the authority of scripture. All a person must do to settle a matter is appeal to the subjective conclusion, "God told me." The reason this is so dangerous is that by concluding that the voice in our head is God, we may inadvertently make ourselves into God.

God has spoken (Hebrews 1:1-4), but it was not to you, or at least not in that way. The scriptures must be the final authority, for only the Scriptures are infallible. And, when we use the scriptures as our guide we must understand them in light of the general principles that guide language. Texts cannot be ripped out of their context. All the Scriptures are God speaking to you. We must understand specific texts in light of their grammar and history. Only then can proper application be made.

I have heard of people using a scripture box. This is a box filled with cards that have scripture texts printed on them. Each day you are to take out a text and receive the word for the day. This is kin to astrology. People use the box in much the same way as they use their horoscope. It doesn't have to be; the text could simply be used devotionally by subjecting one's understanding of the text to the context from which the scripture was taken. However, this is not how they have been used.

Beware the dangers of microwaving the process of discernment. Impressions on our heart and voices in our head may be helpful, but only if they are subjected to the rigorous work of properly interpreting God's Word.

How do you achieve Biblical discernment?

Achieving Biblical discernment is a 5-step process. This process looks more like a conventional oven than it does a microwave oven. Wisdom does not come quickly. Understanding comes at a price.

Step 1 is a commitment to the axiom; God is more concerned with the character of your life than He is the path of your life. Romans 12:1-2 confirms what I said earlier about this matter. “Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. ² Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

I once heard a country Bible teacher explain how this text revealed that God’s will can be divided into three areas. There is God’s good will, God’s pleasing will, and God’s perfect will. This well-meaning gray haired man instructed his disciples that God has many plans for a person’s life. Our obedience or disobedience determines which of God’s plans we live in. I guess by logical default there should also be God’s horrible plan, for those who really disobey.

This is not how this text works. Instead, the reader should view the adjectives good, pleasing and perfect as piling up in description of God’s one holy will. In order to know what God’s will is you have to start with what is known. God’s Word is God’s will. God’s will is righteousness. Living in His will means living according to the precepts and principles of His Word.

That brings us to **step 2**, which is a commitment to living under the authority of God’s Word. Psalm 119:11 says, “I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.” The psalm continues, “I delight in your decrees; I will not neglect your word (v. 16). Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law (v. 18). Your statutes are my delight; they are my counselors (v. 24).” And there is much more. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 also tells us that, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.”

It is really hard to microwave this step, but some people manage to pull it off. Microwaving a commitment to the Word comes from taking shortcuts to understanding hard texts. However, I am thankful for clear texts like 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18, “Be joyful always; ¹⁷ pray continually; ¹⁸ give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” Knowing God’s will is best achieved by knowing God’s Word. In order to achieve this there is no substitute for reading. Commentaries and articles like this one help with the arduous task of interpretation, but there is no shortcut for simply taking the time to ingest large sections of God’s Word.

Now comes **step 3**, a commitment to consistent prayer. 1 Thessalonians 5:17 is key. “Pray continually.” The KJV says to “pray without ceasing.” This exhortation from Paul is God’s will for your life. But it is also the source of huge benefits in coming to terms with life’s decisions. Paul prays for the Colossian brothers like this,

“For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. ¹⁰ And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in

every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God.” (Colossians 1:9-10)

In both of these texts we see the idea of unceasing prayer. This is rightly understood as consistent in repetition. Even the best of Christians have work to do. We would be unproductive if we were constantly on our knees. Instead, we should understand these texts as an exhortation to make prayer a way of life. Prayer should be a daily activity. It should be our habit.

More importantly is the observation from the Colossian text that prayer is a source of the knowledge of God’s will. In light of that, look closer. How does this knowledge come? Paul says through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. Not divination. Paul says that the knowledge of God’s will comes through the “conventional oven” process of attaining wisdom and understanding. Prayer is fundamental to that process.

Step 4 is a commitment to seeking Godly counsel. There are several exhortations in Scripture for us to seek Godly counsel. The Old Testament exhortations are primarily found in Proverbs. Proverbs 11:14 says, “Where there is no guidance, the people fall, But in abundance of counselors there is victory.” Proverbs 15:22 corroborates this by saying, “Without consultation, plans are frustrated, But with many counselors they succeed.” Then in Proverbs 24:6 this same advice is couched in the language of warfare, “For by wise guidance you will wage war, and in abundance of counselors there is victory.” The best example of this in the Old Testament is seen when Jethro counseled Moses to appoint judges over Israel.

The New Testament also has plenty of real life examples of putting the proverbs to work. The most significant to me is found in Acts 15. A very serious debate arose in the church and the future of the church was at a crossroads. Whatever decision was made would be critical for the life of the church. Acts 15 says that all the elders and Apostles came together to determine what to do. This is a healthy example of how godly counsel works.

In addition to this we see Paul telling Timothy that, “I have been reminded of your sincere faith, which first lived in your grandmother Lois and in your mother Eunice and, I am persuaded, now lives in you also. ⁶ For this reason I remind you to fan into flame the gift of God, which is in you through the laying on of my hands. ⁷ For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline.” Three sources of Godly counsel are at work here. First is the counsel of Timothy’s family. He learned the faith from a believing mother and grandmother. The second source of counsel that is at work is the past counsel of Paul and the Ephesian Elders (1 Timothy 4:14). Clearly Paul and Timothy had great affection for this body of men (Acts 20). Their counsel would have been very important. The third source of counsel is Paul himself instructing Timothy. This very letter is an example of godly counsel revealing God’s will to a young man in need.

In addition to this consider Priscilla and Aquila. They instructed Apollos in the faith. From all this, instruction and example, it is clear that godly counsel is

important. The Patriarchs, Kings and Apostles have given us a clear teaching that godly men and women are often a means of discerning what God wills.

Step 5 is the clincher. After reading scripture, much prayer, and adequate counsel it is time to make a decision. This is as important as anything else in the list. We must have confidence that God is in control of all things. This grants us the freedom to make a decision and live with its consequences. When scripture, prayer and godly counsel are informing our decisions we must have the confidence that God will work out His plan. Ephesians 1:11-12 is very clear, "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, in order that we, who were the first to hope in Christ, might be for the praise of his glory." Obviously this text refers to our election, but it also refers to much more. Paul says here that God works out everything in conformity with the purpose of His will.

This does not mean that we cannot sin or make mistakes. We most certainly can. This does not mean that we will never have regrets, for we certainly will. However, what this does mean is that we can have an unshakable confidence that God is in control of all things, even our mistakes. Therefore, whenever we seek to make a decision, we need to ask several sincere questions. Will this decision honor God? Will this decision hurt other people? If I make this decision will I find my heart closer to God or potentially further from God? Of course exploring these questions is all a part of why we read the Scriptures and seek counsel and pray. Nonetheless, once we reach the place that we are confident we are not violating God's law or our own conscience, we should feel the freedom to trust in God's providence.

God's providence is that Christian teaching that informs us of how God governs and sustains all creation. Hebrews 1:3 says that God sustains all things by His powerful word. Colossians 1:17 says that God holds all things together. Everything in this universe depends on God for its existence. That is its initial existence and its ongoing existence. This also includes every circumstance, thought, event and decision.

Conclusion

God is more concerned with the character of our lives than he is the path of our lives. Oh yes, He certainly is concerned with the path we take. But, if we sincerely pursue righteousness, then we will pursue God's path. Matthew 6:33 says, "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."

God's will is not being hidden from you; it is plainly revealed in God's Word. If you have a decision to make, then submit to the principles of God's Holy Word. Be committed to righteousness, read your Bible, pray, seek godly wisdom, and then make the very best decision you can trusting in the almighty, sovereign hand of God to guide all the circumstances of your life. He is in control, and when you are submitted to His care, He works all things for His glory and your good.

This process will take longer than seeking a sign. It will not be nearly as dramatic as receiving a special word. Others will not think you are super spiritual. However, all these are microwave versions of attempting to know God's will. As I said before, for a truly delicious potato you must commit to the time consuming process of the conventional oven. In like manner for a truly God honoring and Biblical life you must submit to the time consuming process of getting to know God through His Word, prayer and the counsel of godly men and women.