

Willing or Willful?

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Romans 12:1-2

Sermon Series:
Best Spiritual Practices

Is that how it works? You pray for God's will and ballots mysteriously appear at your feet?

Four men ran for the presidency of the United States in 1824: John Quincy Adams, Henry Clay, Andrew Jackson and William Crawford. Since none of these candidates received an electoral majority, the presidential contest was decided by the House of Representatives.

In those days, each state had one vote for president. When the House of Representatives voted on February 9, 1825, the deciding vote was cast by New York. The New York delegation was split right down the middle—17 voted for John Quincy Adams and 17 cast their ballots for other candidates. Major General Stephen Van Rensselaer held the tie-breaking vote. His single vote would determine the 6th president of the United States.

Rensselaer had earlier been committed to William Crawford. Martin Van Buren, who was anxious to block Adams, urged Rensselaer to hold firm in supporting Crawford. But Daniel Webster put pressure on him to vote for Adams.

Rensselaer was thoroughly confused. Before casting his vote, he bowed his head and prayed for guidance. When he opened his eyes, he saw a ballot on the floor with Adams's name on it. He interpreted this ballot as an answer

to prayer and as a validation of God's will. So, with great excitement, he picked up the ballot and stuffed it into the ballot box. His single vote gave Adams the 13 states needed to put him in the White House.

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We're preaching this month and last on Best Spiritual Practices, as we're calling it. Today's focus is on the spiritual practice of discernment. Paul writes in Romans 12 that we offer our bodies as living sacrifices and renew our minds so that we will be able to discern the will of God.

The 12th chapter of Romans acts as a fulcrum between the doctrinal and ethical portions of Paul's letter to the Romans. The first 11 chapters provide us a sweeping theological overview of God's mercy extended to rebellious people like us. People wracked by guilt and trapped by sin are forgiven—justified, you might say—through the perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Our response to God's mercy is to offer our bodies as living sacrifices (12:1). Any animal sacrifice in the Old Testament had to be first slain and its blood shed. In the New Testament, Jesus offers his life as a final sacrifice for sin. That's why Paul summons us to offer our bodies as living sacrifices.

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We also offer our minds to God (12:2). Our minds are renewed by God's transforming power. Offering our bodies and minds to God makes it possible for us to discern the will of God.

There are two ways of understanding the will of God in Scripture. First, the Bible speaks of God's decreed will. The decreed will of God refers to what God has ordained that will come to pass regardless of whether or not we cooperate with God. Second, the Bible also speaks about the desired will of God. God's desired will references what God has commanded in which we can choose to cooperate or resist. It is precisely this second aspect of God's will—God's desired will—to which we will confine ourselves today.

Some Christians contend that God has a specific, detailed plan for every Christian's life. God has already mapped out for every believer a mate to marry, a college to attend and a job to perform. Our job as Christians is to discover God's plan for our lives. If we make the right choices, we will discover God's plan and receive the blessing. If we make the wrong choices, we will circumvent the plan and miss out on God's blessing.

The 12th chapter of Romans is not written this way. It says nothing about finding one's mate or career in relationship to God's will. Rather, Paul follows this section on God's will with commands about using our gifts (12:6-8), love (12:9), devotion to

one another (12:10), diligence in serving God (12:11), rejoicing (12:12), hospitality (12:13) and the like. God's will has more to do with behavior fit for the kingdom of God than finding an exact blueprint to follow.

The University of Virginia has been rocked this past week after the alleged murder of a 22-year-old student-athlete named Yeardeley Love by another student athlete. One of Love's coaches commented on her death with these words, "You hear that God has a plan for everyone but maybe he messed up this one time."

Did God mess up or do we place this unspeakable crime at the feet of the accused? God's desired will is for people to make responsible, moral choices. Some people follow God's will by doing the right thing, other people abuse this freedom. God gives people great freedom and responsibility to choose wisely within the confines of moral law.

When it comes down to doing the will of God in your life, ask yourself this question. Do I really want to do God's will?

Sometimes, you see, we are curious about God's will when, in reality, we already have our minds made up. If truth be told, many of us really don't want to do God's will. We want God to sanction our will.

Our willingness to do God's will is epitomized by Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane before his arrest, trial and eventual crucifixion: "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; nevertheless, not my will but yours be done" (Luke

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22:42). Ruth Haley Barton describes this as coming to the point when we are able to say, “I am indifferent to anything but God’s will.”

C. S. Lewis writes in *The Great Divorce*, “There are only two kinds of people in the world: those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, in the end, ‘Thy will be done.’”

If we are willing to do God’s will, chances are we will do it. Thomas Merton’s well-known prayer comes to mind:

My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end....The fact that I think I am following your will does not mean I am actually doing so. But I believe my desire to please you does in fact please you....

Let me pose a second question related to the will of God. Do I really believe that what God wants is best for my life? Barton writes, “To open myself to knowing and doing the will of God requires trust that God’s intentions toward me are deeply good.” Do you believe in your heart of hearts God wants what is best for you? Even when it looks like things are breaking bad, can you recognize that God seeks your welfare? Albert Einstein once remarked that God doesn’t place dice with the universe. God doesn’t gamble with our lives on the line. God doesn’t play dice,

but perhaps God plays chess. God not only sees our first move, but our second, third and fourth moves. God is not boxed-in by our bad choices. God is the master of creative possibilities.

If there is any aspect of God’s character that is reinforced by repetition in Scripture, it is expressed through the Hebrew word “hesed.” You’ll find this word used over and over again in the Old Testament. “The Lord is merciful and gracious; slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love (hesed)” (Exodus 34:6). If we believe God is steadfast in love toward us, we have confidence that God works in redemptive ways, even when circumstances seem to argue otherwise.

Maybe today you are wrestling with God’s will for your life. You are anticipating future choices to be made or looking back on past decisions. Maybe you are on the horns of a dilemma and asking, what does God want me to do with my life? Let me offer six suggestions for your consideration:

1. Clarify God’s will through Scripture. Let me forewarn you—the Bible is not a simple reference book. If you are facing a career choice, it is not possible to turn in your Bible to a section in the table of contents marked “career choices.” Rather, we steep ourselves in Scripture over the long haul so we can become familiar with the things that concern the heart of God.

2. Pray for God’s will in your life. Scripture implores us to call upon God for guidance. “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and do not rely on your own understanding.

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In all your ways acknowledge him and he will make straight your paths” (Proverbs 3:5-6). C. S. Lewis writes, “Prayer is request. The essence of request, as distinct from compulsion, is that it may or may not be granted. And if an infinitely wise Being listens to the requests of finite and foolish creatures, of course He will sometimes grant and sometimes refuse them.”

I'm grateful God has not granted me all the silly requests I've made in prayer. Maybe you've heard it said if you want to make God laugh, tell God your plans.

3. Engage your mind to think through options. God has given us minds to think His thoughts. God doesn't reveal His will by answers that fall from the sky. Don't waste your time looking for signs. Our ability to test and approve the will of God comes directly from the renewal of our minds.

4. Pay attention to the trend of circumstances. When we were preaching through the Book of Acts last year, there were occasions in which God led Paul in his missionary travels through miraculous intervention. But most often God guided Paul through a series of open and closed doors. Look for open doors of opportunity. Unless there is a compelling moral reason not to walk through that open door, then, by all means, proceed.

5. Seek the counsel of trusted friends. We read in Proverbs, “Without counselors plans go awry, but with many advisors they

succeed” (15:22). Some people ask everybody in sight what to do in a certain situation. Seek the counsel of a few people who will tell you the truth.

6. Make the decision. Some people are afraid to make decisions. They have become commitment fearful. They are intimidated to sign on the bottom line or say the word. Let me bring us back to something I said earlier. What God wants is best for us. We can trust the guardrail of God's providential care for our lives.

