

Road to Spiritual Maturity: Part 3  
Spiritual Decision-Making  
May 9, 2010

I think one of the hardest things, as a Christian, is making a decision based on what God would have me do. Discerning God's will for my life can sometimes be a tricky thing. Maybe you've experienced a time in your life when you had to make a decision about something, and as a Christian you knew it was important for the outcome to be in God's will. If so, you know how hard it can be to discern which direction to go.

Let's see how one man discerned God's will as it related to discerning the answer to a decision he had to make. [watch video]

Many times there is more than one good option or solution to a problem. However, only one solution may be within the will of God. It takes spiritual maturity to be able to discern which option is the righteous one.

Near the opening of the Book of Philippians, Paul records his prayer for the Philippian Christians:

*And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God. (Philippians 1:9-11)*

At the heart of this prayer is Paul's desire that his readers exercise the spiritual practice of discernment. He wants them to be able to make good choices, to "determine what is best." In his prayer, Paul gives us the anatomy of this spiritual practice. He points to three necessary building blocks for discernment: love, knowledge, and insight. In other words, we must love and know God; those two will lead to insight into the mind of God.

Paul also describes the desired result of exercising discernment: holiness and righteousness that will contribute to the glory and praise of God. Here he is saying that the goal of spiritual decision-making is not just to arrive at an answer, but to make us more holy and righteous so that God may be glorified. In this way, the virtue of discernment energizes and empowers the thoughtful, mature Christian life.

In his book, Transforming Church Boards, Olsen defines the practice of discernment first by what it is not:

“Discernment is not a logical, rational, ordered discipline that leads deductively to inescapable conclusions.”

He continues by saying, “It is a sometimes lengthy, sometimes meandering activity of determining what God wants, or from an eternal perspective, what already is.” He points to

Romans 12:2 as foundational to the practice of discernment: "*Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.*" Olsen compares discernment to the work of the archeologist, who does not build or destroy, but who discovers and uncovers what is already there."

In order to aid in your spiritual growth, I want to share some steps to understanding and discerning God's will for you.

- The Reverend Billy Graham teaches that before one can understand God's will, one must know God. How do you get to know God? You read and study the Bible – God's revelation of himself to you and me. You should also have a continuous prayer life. Continually praying means that you are in constant two-way communication with God. You should also talk to other people about their experience of God. This way you can see evidence of how God has worked in other situations.
- Confession of sin and reconciliation of relationships: unconfessed sin and un-Godly relationships can be barriers to knowing God's will. You may need to get certain activities out of your life. Or you may need to apologize and seek forgiveness from another person.
- Have a willingness in your heart to do God's will, whatever it may be or whatever it may cost. "*Then He said to them all, 'If anyone desires to come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily, and follow me.'*" (Luke 9:23) Let me take a moment to explain this verse.
  - Deny himself: This is about realizing that God's will isn't about you. It's about what God needs done in His Kingdom. God's will is just that, God's. It rarely has anything to do with your preferences. We are here to serve Him without regard to personal preference...that's part of what makes our service sacrificial.
  - Take up his cross daily: Your cross is not your burden, your malady, or your illness. Your *cross* is the ministry that God has called you to do in support of His will. And while God is aware of your passions and abilities, this ministry activity will likely carry you out of your comfort zone. Think about Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane. As he faced his cross, we know he denied himself as he put His own human preference to avoid pain aside. And, he embraced the cross – his ministry of reconciliation – which surely was not comfortable for Him.
  - Follow me: this is the pay-off for us as Christians. When we follow Jesus, we stay connected to Him and we receive the blessing that he has for us.
- Seek Godly counsel and use your own knowledge of God's will.
- Seek God's will in the Scriptures. "*Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet and a light unto my path.*" (Psalm 119:105)
- Pray for God's will to be made clear for you. Many times I pray that God would make a decision evident by asking Him to open correct doors and close wrong ones so tightly that I cannot walk through them even if I wanted to. For example, at one point I was

discouraged and was thinking about leaving parish ministry. I was considering applying for a position with the Divinity School at Duke. I prayed to know God's will. If the Divinity School position was what I should do I asked God to open that door; if He wanted me to stay in the local church then I asked Him to close it so that there was no way I could walk through it even if I wanted to. The next day I went online to complete the application and the position had been had been filled. I took that as a clear message as to where He wanted me.

- Ask yourself whether you feel God's peace about a specific course of action. Isaiah 32:17 says, "*The work of righteousness will be peace, and the effect of righteousness, quietness and assurance forever.*" In other words, an action or decision that is aligned with the will of God will bring a sense of peace in your spirit. A wrong action or decision will leave you feeling ill-at-ease or unsettled in your spirit.
- Have faith. Proverbs, 3:5-6 reminds us to, "*Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct you paths.*" Leave room for faith.

Discernment is rarely easy, because we so often want to impose our own ideas and preferences on the situation. However, as you make the decision to grow in spiritual maturity, you will realize that your own mindset is fraught with misinformation and sin. The only way to arrive at the destination that God has for your life is to ask him for directions. That's all discernment is: asking the Lord to guide you through the rocks so that the ship of your life arrives safely in the harbor...to the glory of God.