

# Wading River Congregational Church

## SERMONS IN PRINT

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**Romans 11:22-12:2**

**"Guidance"**

Our second question in the *Ask the Pastor* series this summer is: *"The Bible says we should surrender to God and seek his will, but his voice and Word are not always clear. We must act – with no guarantees – knowing that believers have often gone off track, and that God can use our mistakes. How then to discern God's direction for our lives? How do we know God's direction from our own? And when we mess up, is this God's chastising us to get us back on track?"*

For Christians, these are important questions that impact our lives every day. Seeking God's guidance of course means we are already convinced of two fundamental truths: that God has a plan for our lives, and that he communicates with us. We live in a culture where neither of these is widely accepted, so as Christians we need to be clear about seeking or claiming to have found God's will. Granted then that God *has* a will for us, our main question is "how does he speak to us?"

### 1) *Six Classic Ways to Hear God*

Christians through two millennia have discerned six major ways God speaks to us. Note please that they are not independent, but *are all connected* in important and sometimes subtle ways.

The first is *the Bible*. It claims to be God's Word to us, and all Christians to some

degree affirm that they believe this. So the first thing to say about knowing God's will is that most of it is already revealed to us in the Scriptures! Therefore we must study them. If we rarely read the Bible, don't know one end of it from the other, have never read large sections of it, then we cannot expect to know God's will. Daily study of God's Word, meditating on it, even committing parts of it to memory, are essential if we really want to know God's plans for us and for other people.

But we know, if we have spent any time in personal or communal Bible study, that the interpretation of the Bible is not always clear. Major issues may be plain enough, but even then it's not always obvious how to apply it to our lives. But we can say that at the least, the Bible limits the choices we can make. Some things are very clear: if we wonder if it is God's will for us to leave our spouse and run off with an attractive neighbor, or whether we really need to declare all our income on our tax returns, then we are seriously ignorant of God's already revealed will!

In many situations, we can know enough from Biblical principles to frame our choices. Should we take that job in Chicago? It will depend on why we want it, what a move would do to our spouse, our children, our parents, our social and spiritual lives, and so on. What we should not do with the Bible is

take random verses or phrases out of context and force them to apply to our situations! You all know, I am sure, the oft-told and probably apocryphal tale of the man who opened his Bible at random and read "Judas went out and hanged himself." Not caring for that text, he opened his Bible again and found "Go and do likewise." Even more dissatisfied, he tried again, and found "What you are about to do, do quickly!" Do not try to make the Word of God into a source of random sayings that will give you a "tip for the day." On the other hand, if your daily Bible readings, the sermons you hear in church, the texts you hear on Christian radio, keep repeating the same theme, then ask yourself "Is God trying to tell me something?"

The second way God speaks to us, Christians have always believed, is through the *internal promptings of the Holy Spirit*. They may come in dreams, from casual conversations, from prolonged study, from inner desires that occur frequently. Promptings may come from recognizing gifts that we have, or opportunities that present themselves. They may come from a growing inner sense that we can only describe as a "calling" or vocation. They may come as unbidden thoughts after we have prayed earnestly for guidance.

How do we evaluate these promptings? This is of course where we get nervous. Am I imagining things? Am I deluding myself into thinking I am hearing from the Holy Spirit? First we must test our inward sense against Scripture. The Holy Spirit does not disagree with Holy Scripture. If our inner conviction goes against the Bible, we may be fooling ourselves thinking it comes from God.

So here is a good moment to apply the third principle of guidance: *consult other Christians*. We need the wisdom of mature believers to help us: if we think we know what God

wants of us, we need to test it against the spiritual discernment of others. In other words, we need the input of the Church of Jesus Christ in some form. Maybe that's a mature Christian we know and trust; maybe that's our Prayer Group or Bible Study group; maybe it's the Pastor; maybe it's even a larger and more formal group – the Board of Deacons, for example.

For example, when someone senses an inward call to Christian ministry, they are supposed to consult their church leaders, where they will be tested, tried, directed to further study, all with the goal of discerning whether this is a true "calling." Later they will be subject to an ordination council of ministers who will question their call, their training, their beliefs, their experience, their suitability for ordination. So on a less formal scale, in major decisions we should all be looking for the spiritual discernment and affirmation of mature Christians if we truly want to know God's will for us.

And don't forget that the idea that the Christian community is gifted with spiritual discernment is deeply rooted in our history as Congregationalists. Our forebears were convinced that if church members would gather and pray and talk, the Holy Spirit would speak to them and through them until unity was achieved on church matters. Knowing God's will ought to be a communal as well as an individual matter.

This leads us to the fourth source of guidance: *our own reason*. God has made us rational beings, and we are supposed to think, to weigh consequences of actions, to gather information before deciding. Of course our rationality is limited and fallen, and at times our reason can lead us astray, but that does not mean we should not use it! If our sense of inner prompting by the Spirit appears nonsensical, we may need to rethink it. That doesn't mean that the Spirit never

prompts us to “step out in faith” *beyond* where rationality can take us, but we ought to be clear when that is happening, and not act irrationally because we think the Spirit has prompted us to!

The fifth source of determining God’s will has always been considered to be *our circumstances*, or put theologically, *God’s Providential ordering* of our lives. Are doors opening or closing on a particular course of action? Is God showing us one step ahead, which if we take will lead to another clearer one? We might even be guided by the simple principle of “what comes next?” – that is, if we are already clear about some major aspect of God’s call on our lives, then we already know a great deal about his will in smaller things: do what’s next!

Is God’s will such that he makes our paths smooth when we follow it? Do obstacles and hardships mean we are on the wrong path? When we mess up, is God chastening us and getting us back on track? Not from the example of many Old Testament believers, especially Job, or Jesus himself, or Peter, Paul, Stephen; the Bible is full of examples, and warnings from Jesus, that a life in obedience to God’s will is not all easy. Hard times do not mean we are out of God’s will – they can in fact mean the exact opposite: that we are under attack from a demonic world that does not want people doing God’s will.

So aren’t circumstances always ambiguous? Are they ever clear “signs”? Some people live by the signs they see every day. Others never see any signs that mean anything to them! Aren’t the signs that people claim to discern just coincidences? Many years ago, Archbishop William Temple was challenged by a skeptical Brit. “Well,” said the Archbishop, “all the good and wonderful things that come into my life *could* be coincidences, but I have noticed that the

coincidences are more frequent when I pray.”

So the sixth means of guidance is *prayer*. This means asking God to show us his will, as he has promised. It means thanking him for his gracious provision and guidance up to this point. It means asking him to show and do his will in the lives of people we love or are responsible for. And repeated prayer shows us God’s will as we slowly find ourselves praying in new ways, for different things, as our wills are made more like his will. Prayer teaches us that in the end, guidance can come down to where Jesus was in Gethsemane: “Father, here is what I want, if that is possible; but not my will but your will be done.” There is no better way of finding God’s will over an issue than by praying diligently and repeatedly until he begins to make it clear to us what the answer must be.

## 2) *Problems with Guidance*

Finally a few words about “problems with guidance.” We have already asked if following God’s will means a smooth path; the answer is clearly No! So if we are in trouble, in sickness, in hardship, fighting obstacles every day, exhausted and frustrated, it does not mean that our lives are “out of God’s will.” We may in fact be learning new things that God wants us to learn – how to lean on him, how to endure, how to be patient and gentle, how to be gracious when nobody is treating us well. Circumstances are ambiguous but always full of opportunity, and God can use even our worst moments to achieve his perfect purposes in our lives.

Second, is it possible to “miss God’s will for our lives” and spend them lost in the deep woods, off the path, “wasting our lives?” Theologian J. I. Packer, in his fine book *Knowing God*, says too many Christians spend their lives worrying that through their

own fault they will “miss God’s will.” But the Bible makes clear that God’s will is much larger and much more flexible than we can possibly imagine, and that he uses every mishap and wandering for his purposes, and that no-one who truly wants to know God’s will is ever “out of God’s will” – or to put it another way, God’s will is a sovereign will, and he achieves what he sets out to do; he makes all things cooperate with his purposes, and makes all things work together for the good of those who love him. If you are a Christian, he will bring you home, no matter how far you wander or how many “detours” you think you have made!

### 3) *Keys*

The keys to guidance? Truly want it. Pray for it daily. Trust God as a wise, good, strong, Father who plans to give you the best. Trust him, but also use all the means he has given his church: the Scriptures, prayer, the community of believers, our minds, the Spirit, his ordering of all things. Remember too the ancient spiritual disciplines of fasting, meditation, study, worship, celebration, confession. Offer him yourself, and all that you are and have, and ask him to use you for his purposes. He will! And you will rest in the knowledge that you are seeking and doing his will as he reveals it to you.

Let us pray...