

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,  
on Sunday, February 17, 1991, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

### **EPHESIANS 5:15-17**

“Be very careful, then, how you live -- not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore, do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is.”

### **GOD’S WILL FOR MY LIFE (1) CLEARING UP THE CONFUSION**

If you could ask God one question, I suspect that many of you would ask this one: “What is God’s will for my life?” Nothing is more important than knowing God’s will. Dr. John A. Broadus once said that “success is knowing the will of God and being right in the center of it.” God wants us to know His will. He says that in Ephesians 5:15-17: “Be very careful how you live -- not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore, do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is.”

God wants you to understand what His will is; but, you ask, “Why is it so difficult to figure out? How come it’s so confusing?” I think the reason is that there are some basic misconceptions about God’s will, and I want to look at them with you this morning. Let me tell you what God’s will is not:

**1. God’s will is not a feeling.** It’s not an emotion or a sensation. It’s not a quiver in your liver. It’s not goose bumps when you say, “Maybe that’s what God wants me to do!” No. You don’t sit down and let your mind slip into neutral while you wait for a strange sensation.

You see, the problem with this is that feelings are highly unreliable. They come from many different sources. Your feelings may be based on fatigue, illness, a TV show you watched, a book you read, or an overly rich pizza you had last night! Maybe you just need some Pepto Bismol! It’s not God speaking to you — you need two spoonfuls of Maalox!

A friend of mine grew up in a small town in northern California, and a man taught night school in the high school, and he was always getting a “word from the Lord.” “God is telling me to tell you to do this.” And years later that man, Jim Jones, got 900 of his followers to drink poisoned Kool-Aid in Guyana. Suspect anyone who gets a message directly not from the Word of God, but from emotions.

Jeremiah 17:9 says, “The heart is deceitful...” and the Hebrew word means “sick”; and when you’re sick, you don’t feel good; and when you don’t feel good, you can get all kinds of feelings and make all kinds of bad decisions. Even the devil can create feelings in your heart and mind.

**2. God's will is not a formula.** The first was a mystical approach; this is the mechanical approach. It says, "Follow this recipe and you'll get automatic results." Folks, most books on God's will approach the subject in this way: "Do A, B, C, and D, and you discover God's will." We are enticed into this "formula" idea because we live in an age of push-buttons, where we get everything instantly. We want a quick fix. "Ten easy steps to discovering God's will." Have you ever noticed how many "easy steps" there are to everything?! "Cooking made easy." "Give it to me quick; I'm on the run. I'm eating my Big Mac and I'm in a hurry." So we want a formula.

And I have problems with this approach too, for three reasons:

- a. It just flat doesn't work. You could read 12 books on "Easy steps to knowing God's will" and still not discover the name of the girl you are to marry!
- b. These formulas tend to contradict each other. You read one book and it says, "Do this"; and you read another book and it says, "No, do this." And obviously they can't all be right.
- c. If you think God's will is a formula, then you've got to follow it perfectly or you'll get disastrous results. No mistakes are allowed. If you forget one ingredient you're in big trouble. It's like baking; if you leave out one item in the recipe you may end up with a pancake instead of a birthday cake!

What am I saying? Just this: God's will is not a closed system, it is dynamic. And God takes into account even our mistakes.

I hear people say, "Oh, God can't use me. I made a terrible mistake in my life ten years ago. I made the wrong choice. I went into the wrong career. I married the wrong person, and therefore for the rest of my life I've got to settle for the second best." Now folks, that is Satan's lie. You do not find the phrase "second best" in the Bible. No. Just think of the logic of this. Suppose you're meant to marry a certain person, and you marry the wrong one. So, the person you're married to is married to the wrong person. And the person he was meant to marry is married to the wrong person; so that person is also married to the wrong person. And it goes all the way back to Adam's day, because back then someone married the wrong girl! So folks, this is scary -- we're all married to the wrong person!! But, wait a minute -- that is not rational.

All through the Bible, all the believers made mistakes. Moses could have said, "I killed a man; God can't use me." But God did. And David could have said, "I committed adultery. God can't use me anymore." But God did. Peter could have said, "I denied my Lord with curses; God can't use me." But God did. You see, God's will is dynamic; it takes into account even my mistakes and sins. Aren't you glad that's true? Aren't you glad that God's plan for your life is bigger than just a few wrong decisions you've made or a few bad mistakes that have stained your record? God's will is not a feeling, and it's not a formula.

Let me tell you what it is:

**3. God's will is a fellowship; it's a friendship.** Look at 1 Corinthians 1:9 (Living Bible): "God... is the One Who invited you into this wonderful friendship with His Son, even Christ our Lord." You see, God's will is not rules; it is a relationship. God's will is not a life map, but it is a life style. It's the way that you live. It's not an agenda, it is an attitude toward God. Folks, you can study Scripture, and you can try to find the techniques for discerning God's will for your life, and you just don't find them! Now, why is that? If God's will is so important, how come it's not laid out 1, 2, 3, 4? You don't find techniques in the Bible for discovering God's will, but you do find thousands of verses that tell you how to have a relationship with God. God's will is not a set of rigid rules, it is a relationship.

What am I saying? Just this -- focus on God, not on guidance. That's the key to knowing God's will. Often the Bible compares the Christian life to marriage, and marriage is a relationship, and the deeper the relationship, the fewer the rules. Love brings freedom. And the deeper your relationship to God, the fewer the rules, and the less you focus on "Do this" and "Don't do that."

I believe there is a lot more freedom regarding God's will than most Christians realize. I think that in many situations there may be several choices that you could make, and all of them would be God's will for you. I don't think it's a matter of black and white in every situation, where "this" is always right and "that" is always wrong. God sometimes gives us different options, and any of them might fit into the framework of His will, simply because His will is dynamic. Now if God's will is a relationship, then your attitude is the key to that relationship.

So let's see what God has to say about attitudes that block His will in your life. There are at least three of them:

**1. Don't be FATALISTIC about God's will.** This is the attitude — "What will be, will be." "If this bullet has my name on it, it will get me." "It happened, therefore it must be God's will!" And you just passively slide through life with an attitude of resignation saying, "Whatever happens must be God's will and I just have to grin and bear it."

Now folks, that is fatalism, and there are a couple of errors in this kind of thinking:

a. It's unfair to God. If everything that happens is God's perfect will, then God gets blamed for all the bad in the world. Somebody gets leukemia. "It must be God's will!" Somebody gets killed in a plane crash. "It must be God's will."

When I say the phrase, "Well, it must be the will of God," what do you usually think of -- good things or bad things? You read an insurance policy, and it covers everything except "acts of God"! Now, what are "acts of God." — a baby gets born? No. Somebody gets healed? No. Two lovers get married and live happily ever after? No. What are "acts of God"? -- catastrophes, tidal waves, earthquakes, you get struck by lightning on the golf course! - "acts of God." Isn't it amazing that if things go right in my life, the world says I was "lucky"; and if things go wrong, it must have been "the will of God." God gets blamed for the bad, and luck gets the credit for the good! No!

Folks, what am I saying? I'm saying that the Bible makes it extremely clear that God's perfect will is not always done. If God's will was always done, this world would be like the Garden of Eden before the "Fall." It would be a foretaste of heaven. That's why we are to pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." Why? Because it's done perfectly in heaven, and it's done imperfectly down here on earth. So, if God's will was always done, you wouldn't have to pray, "Thy will be done," because it would just happen automatically. A husband runs out on his wife -- "It must have been God's will." Who said so? Don't have a fatalistic attitude toward God's will; that is unfair to God. And

b. It is unhealthy for you. You see, when I adopt this fatalistic attitude, I become a puppet, not a person, and God is just up there pulling strings. And that attitude of fatalism robs you of one of the greatest gifts God has bestowed on you, the gift of the freedom to choose. It promotes self-pity, passivity, and a lack of personal responsibility; and above all, it keeps you from growing spiritually, because all blame is taken off you -- "I didn't have any choice; it was God's will!" We don't grow when we pass the buck and say that everything that happens is God's will. Why do you think Christians are in the world? -- to bring about the will of God!

Somebody says, "I've been unemployed for 18 years, but I know that if God really wants me to have a job, He'll give me one." Baloney! Does that fellow want God to send him a Candy Gram? The parent that makes all the decisions for the child dooms that child to permanent immaturity. God wants you and me to grow up, so He lets us make choices; and even when we make the wrong ones, He uses those also as part of the growing up process. When a baby is learning to walk, he stumbles and tumbles. When you're learning to ride a bicycle, you'll take a few spills. But that's the only way to learn. And God wants you to grow to the point in your life where you make decisions just like Jesus Christ without His having to write it in the sky. Paul says in Philippians 2:5, "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus..." Soak yourself in His Word and you will think His thoughts. And that's called "Christian maturity." It has been said that "wisdom is seeing and knowing and responding to life from God's point of view." You see, God wants you to grow, and He doesn't want you to adopt this fatalistic attitude.

Look at our Lord's words in John 7:17: "If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether My teaching comes from God..." Pay particular attention to that word "chooses." Jesus is saying that God's will involves a choice. God's will assumes my freedom to choose. So don't pass the buck and expect God to make your decisions for you.

Remember that God revealed a lot of His will to you when He gave you a brain. God intends you to make a lot of decisions and solve a lot of problems by using the brain He gave you. Why would He give you a brain and then say, "Set it on a shelf, because I'll write everything in the sky for you to do." I know that a lot of politicians on Capitol Hill sit on their brains, but that's no reason for you and me to do the same thing! Sometimes God wants you to step out and take risks; and even if you make the wrong decision, He will factor that into His plan and somehow bring good out of it. So don't be fatalistic.

**2. Don't be FEARFUL about God's will.** For many people, the very mention of "God's

will” scares them to death! They start to run from it. “God’s will — maybe He’ll send me as a missionary to the Eskimos! What if He makes me a religious fanatic!?” No. Jesus Christ came to earth not to scare us but to save us. Are you sometimes afraid to pray, “Lord, Thy will be done”? Is that a scary sentence regarding your work, regarding your marriage, regarding your children? What is it we are afraid of?

a. We’re afraid of change. “What if God changes my lifestyle?” Well, let’s be honest with you -- He may.

b. We’re afraid of criticism. “What are other people going to think if I sell out to God’s will?”

c. We’re afraid of commitment. “What if I say, ‘God, I really want to do Your will,’ and then God makes it too hard, and I decide I don’t like it?”

The root of this attitude of fear is the suspicion that God doesn’t really have our best interest at heart. That’s the bottom line. Maybe God doesn’t really know what’s going to make me happy. Look at Jeremiah 29:11 (a great verse!): God speaks and says, “I know the plans I have for you... plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.” Notice, He doesn’t say, “I have plans to make you miserable, or plans to make you a fanatic so that everybody’s going to hate you and stay a mile away from you!” Do you know something? -- I have never known a born-again Christian who was not infinitely more happy after he accepted Christ as Savior than he was before it.

What’s the insight? Here it is — God’s will is an expression of God’s love. Everything that God does to you, for you, and through you, He does as an expression of His love. God wants you to be happy, and He knows more about what will make you happy than you do. Just trust Him.

**3. Don’t be FRUSTRATED about God’s will.** This is where many people are today. Maybe to you God’s will is confusing and complicated. You don’t seem to be able to figure it out. Do remember -- God’s will, as I have said, is a relationship with Christ; it is dynamic.

Perhaps some of you are resentful about God’s will. Maybe you planned on doing something; you prayed about it; and you believed “This is God’s will”; and you went ahead with it, and it bombed. And you are resentful. Or maybe you look around at other people, and they are incredibly successful, and they’re not even living for God! “I’m at least living for God, and man, I’m broke!” Maybe you think you’re a failure and that you just can’t start over again; and so you’re anxious and confused about God’s will.

Look at Romans 8:28 (truly one of the greatest verses in the Bible); “We know that in some things God works for the good of those who love Him.” It doesn’t say that, does it? It says “A-L-L” — “We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him.” Does that include my own mistakes? Yes. Does that include me as the innocent victim of someone else’s bad decision? Yes. Does that include things that are beyond my control? Yes. “We know

that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him.”

What that means is this -- God’s will is a long-term process, and that process is to make you like Jesus Christ, and that process includes both problems and pleasures. Problems are a part of life. If you don’t have problems, you’re not living! Check your pulse! The only people who don’t have problems are up in the cemetery! Everybody has problems. When you resolve one problem, guess what? — you get a new one! God uses the problems and the pleasures in our life for His will. So He says, “Don’t be fatalistic, and don’t be fearful, and don’t be frustrated.” What’s the right attitude? It’s not fatalism, fear or frustration; it is FAITH.

Hebrews 11:6 says, “Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to Him must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him.” Do you want to please God by being in His will? It requires faith, and that is why He doesn’t spell it all out! If He spelled it all out, would that require any faith? No. Faith comes when you’re not really sure, and you have to take that step into the dark. He gives you light only for a step at a time. Maturity means moving forward in faith.

#### How do you get started in God’s will?

**1. You establish a relationship to Jesus Christ.** 1 Timothy 2:3,4 says, “This is good, and pleases God our Savior, Who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.” That’s the starting point for knowing God’s will — establishing a relationship with Christ -- because, as I have said, God’s will is a relationship. If you haven’t yet established that relationship, that’s where you must begin. God made you for a purpose, and that means getting into the center of His will by first establishing a relationship, through faith, to the Lord Jesus Christ — not a religion, but a relationship. 2 Peter 3:9 says, “God is not willing that any should perish” (Living Bible). God’s will is that every person should come to know Him personally. If you haven’t made that commitment, make it today.

**2. You begin to fill your mind with God’s Word.** Folks, God’s will is found in God’s Word. People say, “I’m having a hard time knowing what God’s will is.” And I say, “Are you having a regular daily Quiet Time of Bible reading and prayer?” “No.” “Are you memorizing any Scripture?” “No.” “Are you involved in a small group Bible study?” “No.” “Well, what’s your Bible intake?” “Well, I’m coming to church on Sunday.” “Great, but that’s not enough.” The more you fill your mind with this Book, the more you will discover God’s will for you; for the more you know God’s Word, the deeper is your relationship with Christ; and you begin to think like God thinks, and you begin to act the way He wants you to.

Look at Psalm 119:105: “Your Word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.” In Palestine in those days they carried a little oil lamp at night which gave them light only a step at a time. They had no long beam flashlights. So as they took a step forward they had light for that step only. So the Word of God enables you to take that one step at a time, that step of faith that keeps you in God’s will.

You and I can’t see down the road 20 years. It’s a good thing we can’t because it would

overwhelm us. So God says, “One step at a time; My Word will be a light for your path!”

**AMEN.**