

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

JOHN 16:13

“But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes,
He will guide you into all truth.”

GOD’S WILL FOR MY LIFE (4) GOD’S GUIDELINES FOR DECISION MAKING

When going on a trip, most people arm themselves with a map. However, God’s will is not a map, because God doesn’t really reveal His will to you all at once, for your whole life. He doesn’t let you know where you’ll be, or what condition you’ll be in 20 years down the road. Our heavenly Father likes to reveal His will for you a little bit at a time, step by step, so that you will depend on Him each day and each moment.

The best way to travel is the way that God recommends, and that is to have a personal Guide. The first time we visited Europe, we drove our own car, and did the trip on our own, and it was a virtual disaster! We said, “Never again!” And each time since, we have gone on a guided tour. You see, the guide knows exactly where to go; he describes the terrain; he gives you background information on the country and its people; and he takes you to all the interesting places on the route and explains their significance. A good guide makes your trip come alive!

Now the Bible tells us that God gives us the Holy Spirit to be our Guide. He is with us, because, more than guidance, God wants to give you a Guide. Our text says, “But when the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all truth.” In Psalm 32:8 God says, “I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go. And I will counsel you and watch over you.” So God says, “Just follow Me as your Guide!”

Now the question this morning is this: How does the Holy Spirit guide us? Most of the time He guides us in quite normal ways. So how do you get guidance in the daily routine of life?

Let us consider today nine guidelines for decision making, not a neat little formula, but just nine steps for guidance.

1. Relax. I think that’s the first thing God would say to you this morning -- “Just relax”; because one of the most common mistakes we make in seeking God’s will is that we become too anxious; we get too uptight. “Am I really in the will of God? Have I missed it?” Folks, God’s will is not a tightrope where, if you take one wrong step, you’re done for. When you’re all on edge you can’t think clearly, and that makes it much harder for God to get through to you to reveal His will for your life.

Now why do we get uptight about God’s will? -- because of two misconceptions:

- a. we think it all depends on us; and
- b. we think that we have to figure it all out, that we have to know exactly what's happening.

Let me emphasize this fact — God's will is not ultimately your responsibility; it's God's responsibility to reveal it to you; and it's your responsibility to respond to it. Let's say I call my children together one day and I say to them, "Children, I'm your father, and I have a wonderful plan for each of your lives. If you follow my will, it will please me; things will go better for you; and we'll have a great family relationship!" And the children say, "Oh dear father, we are ready to do your will. We are here; we are sincere. Now, father, just tell us what your will is." And I say, "Hey, wait a minute; you've got to figure it out on your own. I'm not going to tell you; that would make it too easy. In fact, I'm going to try to trap you. If you do what I want you to do, it will work out great, but I'm not going to tell you what it is!" Now, a lot of people think God acts that way. He doesn't. He wants us to know His will. He wants to guide us; and it is His responsibility to teach us His will.

Look what Proverbs 3:5,6 says: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart..." God says, "Don't worry about it; it's not your ultimate responsibility to discover My will; it's My responsibility to reveal it. You just trust Me." Now doesn't that take a lot of pressure off you?

And then God says, "and lean not on your own understanding." The other reason we get uptight is that we think we have to figure it all out. Our human nature always impels us to try to figure out "Why?" "Why is this happening? What is going on here?" We have to have a rational explanation for everything. The fact is, folks, we don't have to know the reason for everything. We're just called to follow and to obey. God's timing is always perfect, so we are just called to trust Him for the consequences.

So, you relax. I think being relaxed means being emotionally relaxed, physically relaxed, spiritually relaxed. If you're uptight, if you're enslaved by pressure, if you're dead tired, now is not the time to make a major decision. Wait until you're relaxed.

2. Be willing to obey in advance. What am I saying? I'm saying that you choose to do God's will even before you know what it is. I call that "a prior attitude of commitment." David says in Psalm 40:8, "To do Your will, oh my God, is my desire." He said, "I want to do it even before I know what it is." Jesus said, in John 7:17, that anyone who chooses to do God's will, will know it. You choose to do it in advance.

Now this is where 90% of the problem comes in knowing God's will, because there is "the battle of the wills," the struggle between my will and God's will. And often the two wills are in conflict, and the key to victory is in being willing in advance to do whatever God says. You see, what we like to do is this -- we like to play a game with God and say, "God, You show Your will to me, then I'll decide whether or not I want to do it." But God's will is not for the curiosity seekers. He says, "You decide in advance; you put your trust in Me," Now remember, if you say, "God, I want to follow You 100%. I'm willing to go anywhere, to do anything You want me to do," God will test you. Count on it. He will test you to see if you mean business.

Perhaps you're saying, "I'm not sure if I'm ready to do God's will. To be frank, I don't know if I want to do it or not." Well, be honest with God, Say, "God I don't know, but I'm willing to be made willing." That's the right attitude of mind and heart — "I'm willing to be made willing."

So, you relax, and you're willing to obey in advance, then...

3. You make sure you're in unbroken fellowship with God. 1 John 1:9 says that you've got to have a clear conscience in order to be in fellowship with God. And Romans 12:1,2 talks about dedicating yourself totally to God. Your first priority is to enthrone Jesus Christ as Lord of your life. And then, says Paul, you will know what is "the good and pleasing and perfect will of God." You get your life going as God wants it to go, and then He can show you the specifics. The only way in which the Holy Spirit can be your Guide is when you're in fellowship with Him.

4. You search the Scriptures. As I've said before, God's will is found in God's Word. So, you read the Bible. And God's will never contradicts His Word. I think any major decision in your life is just an excellent reason to go and do a Bible study on the subject that is engaging your attention. I wouldn't want to get married without studying all that the Bible has to say about marriage. I wouldn't want to make a job change without finding out all that the Scripture has to say about work. If you're under stress, examine the Word of God to see what it has to say about stress. You look for the principles, the promises, the examples and the commands contained in the Bible, because God's will is found in God's Word -- not the name of the person you are to marry, but the type of marriage you are to have. You do a systematic study of the Word. You search the Scriptures. You look for the principles before you make your decision.

5. You pray for God's wisdom. James 1:5 says, "If anyone lacks wisdom, let him worry about it!" No! That's not what it says. It says, "If anyone lacks wisdom, let him ask God..." James 4:2 says, "You do not have, because you did not ask God." Over and over again the Bible challenges us to ask for wisdom. How many of us spend even two minutes a day saying, "Lord, what do You want me to do?" So, pray and ask God. Philippians 4:6 says -- don't panic, pray! Don't worry. Don't get uptight.

But you say, "I don't even know what to pray for." And that's where you turn to Romans 8:26 which says, "We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express." The Holy Spirit knows our heart, and He prays on our behalf. And often in prayer God will plant an idea in your mind and show you His will.

Jeremiah 33:3 says, "Call upon Me and I will answer you, and tell you great and marvelous things you do not know."

6. You get the facts. You check it out. You get the whole story. You don't make a decision on faulty knowledge. As I said before, God gave you a lot of wisdom and guidance when He gave you a brain; and He expects you to get the facts. Look at Proverbs 23:23 (Living Bible): "Get the facts at any price and hold on tightly to all the good sense you can get." And Proverbs 19:20 (Living Bible): "Get all the advice you can and tie wise the rest of your life."

How many of you have learned from experience that things are not always what they appear to be? You know they're not. So, you've got to get the facts. And yet I am amazed at how many people get married before they even really get to know the person they're going to marry; or how many people accept a job offer before they have really checked out what that job offer includes and involves. People so often just "go with the flow." The Holy Spirit guides you only as you seek to get the facts.

In Luke 14:28,29 Jesus says that a wise person doesn't build a tower without making sure he has enough money to finish it. We've all seen "white elephants," haven't we? -- buildings that were never completed because the builder ran out of funds. So you find out the facts before making a decision.

Getting the facts, I think, also includes a realistic evaluation of your own abilities. "Can I do this? Am I gifted in this area? Do I have the God-given talent to succeed in this?" And God can guide you that way.

Proverbs 24:6 (Good News Bible) says, "You must make careful plans before you fight a battle, and the more good advice you get, the more likely you are to win." So, get advice from the right people - godly mature Christians.

And how do you get advice? Well, I think the Bible teaches that you ought to get advice from people who are neutral, people who will neither profit nor lose by your decision. I have to admit that people have come to me and said, "You know, Pastor, I'm praying whether I ought to move out of the area, or not." And they expect me to be neutral on that?! I'm going to lose a member or two! You've got to be kidding! I say to them, "I'll pray for you"; but they're usually the most prejudiced prayers I ever offer! "Lord, You know I don't want to lose them!" So if you have the slightest thought of leaving the area, be sure to let me know so I can pray against it!

I think it's wise to get advice from people who have been where you want to be. See if it's all that it's cracked up to be. Proverbs 15:22 (Good News Bible) says, "Get all the advice you can, and you will succeed; without it, you will fail."

7. Consider your desires. Ask yourself, "What do I really want and why?" Psalm 37:4 says, "Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you a 'bummer.'" No. That's not what it says. "Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart" -- not just your needs, but your desires. Psalm 84:11 (Good News Bible) says, "He does not refuse any good thing to those who do what is right." God says, "I want to bless you." Do you want to bless your children? Of course you do. You're willing to sacrifice for their good. You want them to have everything you can afford for them to have, and more. Likewise, your heavenly Father wants to give you good gifts.

Psalm 145:19 says, "He fulfills the desires of those who fear him." So, if you're honestly committed to doing God's will even before you know what it is; if you say, "Lord, I really want to do Your will. It doesn't matter what it is, I'm willing to do it"; if you've prayed for God's wisdom, and studied the Scriptures, and made sure you're in fellowship with the Lord, and

you've gotten all the facts, then I believe God can use your desires to direct you. Your desires are not always opposite to God's will! Just because you want something is not a sure sign that God is against it! God often uses our desires to direct us into His will. He can even put desires in your heart.

8. In faith make a decision. Proverbs 16:9 (Living Bible) says, "We should make plans — counting on God to direct us." The Bible says it's OK to make plans. Sometimes the time comes when you have to step out in faith. You have to go for it, even when you're not completely sure, even when you don't have all the answers. You have to make the move and launch out into the deep.

The space shuttle has a fantastic multimillion dollar guidance system built into it. And yet that guidance system isn't worth two cents until the space shuttle leaves the launch pad. It is only when the shuttle starts moving that the guidance system goes into operation. Likewise, you can't steer a parked car. When it's parked, the steering wheel is locked. You have to get the car going before you can guide it. And that's true with regard to your Christian life. Get going! So many people are simply waiting around for God to zap them with a thunderbolt. They say, "Oh Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?" And God wants to say, "Get up off your 'blessed assurance'; get started!" Just do what you already know God wants you to do. You say, "But I'm afraid. What if I make a mistake?" So what! Guidance comes to those who move in faith, not to those who sit in doubt.

Remember, a mistake is a mistake; it's not a sin. We all make mistakes. But I believe God would rather have you make a mistake in faith than have you sit in doubt and do nothing. It's when you step out in faith that the waters of your Red Sea part, and let you pass through on the way to your Promised Land.

Now, you wouldn't think that the Apostle Paul would have much trouble knowing God's will, would you? Paul went 'round the Mediterranean world, starting new churches. How did he know what churches to start? Look at Acts 16:6-10. He tried to go into the province of Asia, and the door slams shut in his face. He tried to go into Mysia, and again the door closes. He tried to go into Bithynia, and the same thing happens. Here is this great Christian leader ricocheting off closed doors. It was like a pinball machine! So he went to Troas, and waited, and said, "What's happening, Lord?" And God said, "Paul, I want you to go across the sea to Greece."

Do you know what Paul's method of knowing God's will was? - keep moving ahead and ask God to close doors if you're going the wrong way! The doors into Asia and Mysia and Bithynia were closed, but there was an open door into Greece, so he went that way. Now this is a valid form of guidance. God not only guides us by "steps"; He also guides us by "stops." Sometimes He simply slams the door. Psalm 37:23 (King James Version) says, "The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord." And I believe the "stops" of a good person are ordered by the Lord also. God closes some doors, and He opens others.

How can you be sure when it is God's will? You can't! It's that simple. In most areas of life, you will never be 100% sure that something is God's will, because if you were dead sure, then you wouldn't be living by faith; you'd be living by sight; and the Bible says we walk by

faith and not by sight (2 Corinthians 5:7), and that without faith it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:6).

Now God knows our nature. He knows the kind of things that scare us. So He gives us one more guideline:

9. Let circumstances confirm God's will. I'm not saying, "Let circumstances reveal God's will," but let them confirm His will — after the fact — after you've stepped out in faith. Proverbs 16:1 (Living Bible) says, "We can make our plans, but the final outcome is in God's hands." We make our plans, but we know the ultimate result is up to God. And one of the things God does is to use circumstances to confirm His will after we've made the decision.

When, 40 years ago, my wife and I, with two small children, sailed from Ireland to Canada, I was simply returning home to where I wanted to be; but she was leaving her home and family to go to a new country, 3,000 miles away. And one of the circumstances that confirmed to me that we had done the right thing, and were in the will of the Lord, was the fact that from the moment of our arrival on this continent, she was happy and contented in the land of her adoption, and doubly happy when, six years later, we were called to live and serve in these wonderful United States!

Now you should never let circumstances be the sole criteria for making any decision in life. Why? Because if circumstances are the sole criteria, you are no longer an actor, you are a reactor; and you go through life reacting to circumstances, allowing things to control you, instead of letting the Holy Spirit control each situation. Simply let God use circumstances as an additional support, confirming that you have made the right decision.

So, are you willing just to relax, in the sure knowledge that God wants His very best for you?

Are you willing to obey in advance — to choose to do God's will even before you know what it is?

Have you made sure that you are living in unbroken fellowship with Christ?

Are you searching the Scriptures constantly, and praying for God's wisdom; and getting all the facts about your situation, even considering your own desires in the matter?

And are you stepping out in faith, knowing that guidance comes to those who move in faith, not to those who sit in doubt?

And are you waiting expectantly for God to confirm His will for your life by creating circumstances that will assure you that His blessing is upon you and the decisions you have made?

God is not trying to play games with you regarding His will. He wants you to know His will more than you want to know it. Indeed, if you're truly sincere, I don't think you can miss it!

And remember -- what God wants to give you more than guidance is this: He wants to give you Himself. He doesn't want to give you a guidebook; He wants to give you a Guide, the Holy Spirit, to come and live with you and in you, to direct you step by step.

AMEN.