DECERNING THE WILL OF THE LORD

**DATE:** 7/14/2010 Wed.

**TEXT: Acts 21:1-14**

**INTRODUCTION:**

This message is going to be a little different then what we have been use to in this series on the Book of Acts

Tonight I’m going to bring you a Topical message from our text

As Christians we should want to know God’s Will for our lives

We should want to know His Will concerning any major decision …

(Such as our career, what we should pursue, the person that we should marry, and the place where we should live )

We need His guidance on dozens of daily decisions affecting our money, our time, and our relationships

If you know Christ as Savior and Lord, you’ll want to

please Him in every aspect of your life

And one way is, by making wise decisions in line with His Will

Most of God’s Will is already revealed in the Commands and Principles of His Word

You don’t need to pray for guidance in these areas

**Ill.** For example; you don’t need pray about whether you should marry a nice non-Christian! God has already revealed His will on the matter, and that is you are not to be unequally yoked **II Corinthians 6:14** You don’t need to pray about whether to pursue a career as a drug dealer or burglary. You don’t need to pray about whether or not the

person to whom you are already married is God’s choice for your life partner etc.

All of these and many other decisions are clearly spelled out in the Word of God

We simply need to Learn, Understand and Obey the Commands that are revealed there

But what about those decisions that are not specifically spelled out?

There are many such decisions where we need to know how to Discern God’s Specific Will

Some folks depend heavily on subjective feelings or signs, to determine the Will of God

**Ill.** For example, a girl was praying about where to go to college, when she came upon the Lord’s words to Jacob, ***“Arise, go to Bethel”*** Since her fellowship had a college of that name, she decided that God was telling her to go to Bethel College. I hope that once she got there she didn’t read **Amos 4:4** which says, ***“Come to Bethel, and transgress;”!***

So then, how do we Discern God’s will in those areas that are not specially spelled out in the Word of God?

The bad news (or good news, depending on how you look at it) is that there is **no** Simple, Mechanical formula in Scripture for Discerning God’s Will in specific situations

If there were, we would probably just leave God out of the equation

→ So the good news is that God primarily guides us through our relationship with Him

→ As we grow to understand His Word and learn to walk daily by His Holy Spirit in Faith

But since even the best of us (including Paul) are sinners …

It is an imperfect and somewhat uncertain process at best

But when we miss God’s will due to our inability or sin

He is sovereign and gracious to overcome our mistakes

The uncertainty of this process is revealed in the difference of opinion between godly scholars over whether Paul was right or wrong to return to Jerusalem

The Holy Spirit had repeatedly revealed to Paul that he would encounter ***“bonds and afflictions”*** if he went

to Jerusalem (**20:23**)

Some commentators argue that Paul was either deliberately sinning or making a foolish mistake to continue his journey in light of these warnings (see **21:4**)

Others (the majority of those that I read) argue that Paul was right and that those who pled with him were wrong

But our text specifically, and the testimony of Paul throughout the Book of Acts, in general …

Reveals to us, some very profound principles on how to Discern God’s will:

*We should walk so closely with God that we Discern His*

*Guidance as we live in Obedience to His Word, (Faith) and in dependence on the Holy Spirit*

I want to give you 7 principles for ***“Discerning the Will of the Lord”***

Let’s look at the scripture his evening and see if we can’t be those who –

***“Discern the Will of the Lord”***

**~~~OPENING PRAYER~~~**

First off , to be able to Discern the Will of God, we must write God –

**I. A BLANK CHECK**

You must write a blank check with your life

It’s a waste of time for us to speculate about God’s will for our life unless we are absolutely committed to obeying it

God isn’t a travel agent who arranges your itinerary and then asks, *“What do you think?”*

You say, *“I like the week in Hawaii, but I’d prefer not to go*

*to that Muslim country as a missionary. Could you change that to a few years in Tahiti, please?”*

He’s the Lord, Right?

And isn't it true that He loves us and has a wonderful plan for our life?

**Romans 12:1, 2 – *“I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service”   
“And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God”***

We must yield our entire life to Him, trusting that His Will for us is good, acceptable, and perfect

Paul had long since done that, so that he could now say in **v.13b –**

***“…for I am ready not to be bound only, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus”***

**Acts 20:24 – *“But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God”***

Signing your life over to God may seem to be a bit extreme (because)

→What if we do, and He tells us to go to some jungle as a missionary, (when I don’t even enjoy camping out)?

→What if you don’t like the cold, and He sends you to the far North?

We need to remember, He is our *loving* Heavenly Father and He is all-knowing and all-wise

His purpose is to be glorified through us, by blessing our life

So, at some point, you’ve got to begin by trusting Him

Granted, His path for you may include some severe and difficult times

But you can trust that even in those (severe & difficult times)

He will bless you in ways that you cannot imagine …

**I Corinthians 2:9 – *“But as it is written, Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither have entered into the heart of man, the things which God hath prepared for them that love Him”***

**If,** you will only trust Him and submit to Him

His Word promises in **Psalm 84:11b – *“no good thing will He withhold from them that walk uprightly”***

No one, including those who go through severe trials or difficulties …

… And have written God a blank check with his or her life

Later regretted it!

You must begin here, if you want to Discern His Will

Secondly, If we are to be able to Discern the Will of God there must be a –

**II. DESIRE**

We must Desire to know Him through His Word and the Holy Spirit

Paul had known the Lord and walked closely with Him for

years at this point

This fact, along with the fact that there is no hint in the text that Paul was being disobedient, leads me to disagree

with those who say that Paul was not right

It may not have been the wisest from our prospective

He may have been blinded to something that is obvious to us from our hindsight

(It’s always easier to know God’s will after the fact!)

But Paul’s aim for many years now, had been to know Christ

**Philippians 3:9,10 – *“And be found in Him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith:”   
“That I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being made conformable unto His death;”***

He knew God’s Word well, and he walked by the leading of the Holy Spirit, not in the flesh

**Galatians 5:16 – *“This I say then, Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfil the lust of the flesh”***

I think that as best as he knew how, Paul was seeking to obey the Lord by going to Jerusalem (I’ll explain in the next pt)

**Ill.** I have been married to my wife for over 30 years now. On many occasions I could tell you what she would want without asking her opinion. I know her will because I know her. In the same way, knowing God’s will in a specific situation is very much bound up with knowing God Himself.

There are no shortcuts or easy formulas to knowing the Lord

It’s a process that requires diligently seeking Him in His Word and in prayer over time (Faithfulness)

For some reason, God has designed life so that you have to make some of the biggest decisions (career, marriage partners etc.) when you lack the maturity that you would gain later in life!

That’s one reason why we should seek the wise counsel of those who have followed the Lord for many years

Over 194 times is the word ***“counsel”*** or some form of it found in the Word of God

I can’t give you all of them, but here’s just a few from the Book of Proverbs

**Proverbs 1:5 – *“A wise man will hear, and will increase learning; and a man of understanding shall attain unto wise counsels:”***

**Proverbs 11:14 *–“Where no counsel is, the people fall: but in the multitude of counsellors there is safety”***

**Proverbs 12:15 *–“The way of a fool is right in his own eyes: but he that hearkeneth unto counsel is wise”***

**Proverbs 15:22 *–“Without counsel purposes are disappointed: but in the multitude of counsellors they are established”***

**Proverbs 19:20,21 – *“Hear counsel, and receive instruction, that thou mayest be wise in thy latter end”   
  
“There are many devices in a man's heart; nevertheless the counsel of the LORD, that shall stand”***

**Proverbs 20:5 – *“Counsel in the heart of man is like deep water; but a man of understanding will draw it out”***

**Proverbs 20:18a – *“Every purpose is established by counsel:”***

**Proverbs 22:20 – *“Have not I written to thee excellent things in counsels and knowledge”***

**Proverbs 24:6 – *“For by wise counsel thou shalt make thy war: and in multitude of counsellors there is safety”***

**Proverbs 27:9 – *“Ointment and perfume rejoice the heart: so doth the sweetness of a man's friend by hearty counsel”***

(Folks like your parents, the pastor, other godly folks, soul winners etc)

In the days gone by, these decisions were pretty much made for us

If your father was a farmer, you became a farmer

Career choice wasn’t much of an option

Your parents had a major role in choosing your marriage partner also

It’s only in today’s age that young people have had pretty much free reign on these major decisions of life!

Wise and godly young people will seek wise and godly counsel

If you are a relatively new believer, you should probably postpone some of life’s major decision until you get a basic grounding in God’s Word

Also to Discern the Will of God we must –

**III. ACT**

On Biblical Principle and Not on Human Philosophy

I’m expanding here on the previous point in order to say that

at times …

God’s Wisdom and His Ways are opposed to Man’s Wisdom and Man’s Ways

**Isaiah 55:8,9 – *“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways, saith the LORD”   
“For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts”***

Not usually, but occasionally, God wants us to do something that defies human logic

For example, using our text, human wisdom and logic would say that we should avoid a course of action that will lead us into obvious trials

But sometimes God’s will is to be glorified through His servants as they obey

(endure various trials, or even through their martyrdom)

**A.** The Biblical Principle that was governing Paul’s trip to Jerusalem was found in **Galatians 3:28**

***“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus”***

He was taking the collection that he had raised from the Gentile churches to the Jewish church as a demonstration of love and unity (note the biases between Jew & Gentile)

Luke hardly mentions this collection

**Acts 24:17 – *“Now after many years I came to bring alms to my nation, and offerings”*** (Paul before Felix)

But from Paul’s epistles we know that it was a big deal to him

Turn to **Romans 15:25-32**; II **Corinthians 8 & 9**

Luke’s silence about it may reflect that he did not think that it was a very good idea

But the principle behind it, the unity of the church, is an important Biblical Doctrine (**John 17:11,21-…**)

Paul was willing to march into the face of danger on the basis of his commitment to this truth

**B.** Also driving Paul was his heart’s desire for the salvation of his people (the Jews)

This was such a compelling force that Paul says that he would be willing to be cut off from Christ for eternity if it meant the salvation of the Jews

**Romans 9:3 – *“For I could wish that myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh:”***

Because of this compelling desire to see the Jews saved

Paul was willing to sacrifice his life, if need be

We need to live on the basis of Biblical Principles, not human philosophy

To Discern the Will of God we must –

**IV. ANALYZE**

Our Gifts, Motives, and Desires in light of God’s sovereign purpose of being glorified

Is it possible to be committed to doing the Lord’s will …

…But to be in the wrong place or position?

For example, perhaps Paul could have sent some delegates with the collection, but stayed away himself

He would have still accomplished his desire of unifying the church

**A. Gifts**

A key question, which is not always easy to answer, is …

*“Where can I be the most effective in furthering God’s kingdom in light of my gifts?”*

For example, I have a heart for missions, but I know that I am not an evangelist /church planter

I’ve had to asked myself, *“Am I more effective to stay in America and instill in God’s people a heart for missions or to go myself?”*

Paul was admirable in his commitment to be willing to suffer and die for the name of Christ

But I can’t help asking, should someone have asked him whether he:

→Would be more effective in prison or dead …

→Or free to continue ministering as he was?

It is not always God’s will for us to be so committed that we ignore our own safety

On one occasion, David asked the Lord if the men from the town of Keilah (ke-i'-la )would turn him over to King Saul –

**I Samuel 23:1-13**

When God said, *“Yes, they will turn you over,”*

David took off (and rightly so)

It’s a tough question to ask up front …

Because sometimes God can use us more while we are in prison or through martyrdom than if He spared our lives

In addition to our gifts and how we can best be used

We need to examine our Motives and Desires

**B. Motives and Desires** (we need to ask)

Am I truly seeking God’s glory or my own?

Is my heart open before Him, with no secret sins?

If I can honestly answer yes, then I should ask

*“What are my desires? What do I enjoy doing?”*

If I am delighting in the Lord, then I can trust Him to give me the desires of my heart

Either by fulfilling my current desires

Or by changing those desires to be in line with His purpose

**Psalms 37:4 – *“Delight thyself also in the LORD; and he shall give thee the desires of thine heart”***

He’s a loving Heavenly Father who delights in blessing His children by granting them their holy desires

So if I am delighting in God, it’s a legitimate question to ask:

*“What do I enjoy doing?”*

Then that may be where we should serve Him

To Discern the Will of God we must –

**V. EVALUATE**

You must Listen To and Evaluate the counsel of godly believers

Look at **v. 4** – Our text says that ***“through the Spirit”*** these believers told Paul not to go to Jerusalem

Those who think that Paul made a mistake or sinned …

Argue that he disobeyed the direct command of God

But most commentators say that ***“through the Spirit”*** means:

*“That the Spirit’s message was the occasion for the believers’ concern, Rather than that their trying to dissuade Paul, was directly inspired by the Spirit”*

So they see it not as Paul’s rejecting God’s command …

But rather as God’s revealing what would happen

With Paul’s friends’ having a natural desire to talk him out of going

After Agabus’ prophecy (**vs. 10, 11**) , even Luke and Paul’s other traveling companions (**v.12** says ***“we,”***) joined in with the locals in trying to persuade Paul not to go to Jerusalem

And Paul’s response shows that they were getting to him

Look at **v.13** again ***– “Then Paul answered, What mean ye to weep and to break mine heart?”***

But he was so strongly persuaded that God wanted him to go

That he resisted their appeals

Which side was right?

Frankly, it’s difficult to say

Paul may have been a bit strong-headed in not listening to their counsel

He didn’t need to go to Jerusalem to prove that he was willing to suffer and die for the Lord

If he had not gone, perhaps God would have used him even more powerfully than He did

On the other hand, Paul’s resolve to stand alone, even against a group of godly men who were unified in pleading with him not to go, may show how firmly he believed that he was in the will of God

Several commentators point out numerous parallels between Jesus’ firm resolve to go up to Jerusalem to the cross and Paul’s resolve here

So it’s difficult to decide which side was right

But the point is, we must evaluate the counsel that we receive, even if it comes from a unified group of godly friends

Let’s review

Thus to Discern God’s Will:

→ You must write God a blank check with your life

→ You must know Him Intimately through His Word

and His Spirit

→ You must Act on Biblical Principles, not Human Philosophy

→ You must Analyze your Gifts, Motives, and Desires in light of God’s purpose for His Glory

→ You must Listen To and Evaluate godly counsel

We must also:

**VI. PRAY**

To discern God’s will, you must prayerfully evaluate the

circumstances that God providentially brings into your

life

Again, this is not an easy thing to do!

For example, God had now brought into Paul’s life repeated warnings against going to Jerusalem from many different sources

→ Should he have taken these warnings as God saying, *“Don’t go?”*

→ Or, could they be, to test his obedience to what he knew to be God’s will?

→ Perhaps the warnings were for the purpose of helping both the saints and Paul to stand firm after he was imprisoned, knowing it to be God’s will in advance

→ Perhaps Paul’s other circumstances, such as being able to

get on ships that got him to Jerusalem in time for Pentecost, showed God’s approval on his going there

As you can see, the same set of circumstances can be interpreted in a number of ways

So we need to be careful in how we evaluate them

It’s generally not wise to *“put out fleeces”* to try

to determine God’s will

Sometimes closed doors do not mean *“no,”* and sometimes open doors do not mean *“yes”*

Finally,

**VII. USE SOUND JUDGMENT**

After prayerfully following all of the above

And in total dependence on God …

You must follow your own Sound Judgment, Conscience,

and Convictions, submitting to the consequences

Ultimately, each person must determine God’s will for himself or herself

You can’t blame others for the decisions that you make

In a marriage, the husband is accountable to God for family decisions

→But any wise husband will only go against a godly wife’s

counsel after much deliberation and prayer

→A pastor will only go against the godly counsel of his men after much deliberation and prayer

If Paul was right here, and his friends were wrong …

It illustrates the point that sometimes wrong counsel stems from loving motives

It was because these people loved Paul that they pled with him not to go

But he had to go against the wishes of his friends to do what he thought God wanted him to do

Sometimes people may counsel you not to do something because they are genuinely concerned for your well being

That counsel could be from the Lord, but it might not be from the Lord

The Will of God is not necessarily the most trouble-free

route

You must work through the process in dependence on the

Lord and then lovingly tell family and friends –

*“I’m doing what I believe God wants me to do. Please pray for me”*

**Romans 15:30-31 – *“Now I beseech you, brethren, for the Lord Jesus Christ's sake, and for the love of the Spirit, that ye strive together with me in your prayers to God for me;”  
“That I may be delivered from them that do not believe in Judaea; and that my service which I have for Jerusalem may be accepted of the saints;”***

**CONCLUSION**

What if you make a mistake in Discerning the will of God?

If you come to realize that your mistake was due to stubbornness, self-will, or pride …

Confess it and ask God to overrule your mistake

I don’t think that Paul sinned by going to Jerusalem

But I’m not sure whether or not he made the wisest decision

But God used Paul’s prison years for His glory

And He can use our mistakes and even our rebellion if we submit to Him and seek to please Him

Remember, the process begins when you trust Christ as Savior and when you write Him that blank check with your life …

...Being willing to do whatever He calls you to do

If you’ve never repented of your sins and trusted in Christ

You are clearly out of the will of God …

Because He is not willing that any should perish

But desires for all to come to repentance

**II Peter 3:9 – *“The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance”***