

Determining the Lord's Will

"I delight to do thy will, O my God."

—*Psalm 40:8*

THE ESSENCE OF CONSE-

cration is contained in the words of our theme text and,

although these words of the psalmist prophetically spoke of Jesus, they also speak of the attitude that Jesus' body members—the church—must have developed fully in them. The 'will' may be expressed as one's desire, delight, what one takes pleasure in, what one wants, approves of, and deems acceptable. When we speak of God's will, as does this verse, we speak of God's desire, delight, what God takes pleasure in, what God wants, what God approves of and deems acceptable.

The Scriptures point out various important features about God's will. Jesus said that it would not be enough just to believe or to even know God's will, but that doing it was necessary also. "Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven." (Matt. 7:21) Apostle Paul tells us that God's will must be done from the heart—it must be rooted in a heart's desire

to please God. “Not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart.” (Eph. 6:6) In order to do God’s will, we must know what that will is. Hence these words, “For this cause we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to desire that ye might be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding.” (Col. 1:9) Summing up the eternal importance of doing God’s will, Apostle John says, “He that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.”—I John 2:17

LEARNING HIS WILL

Those who have taken the step of full consecration to God, whether recently or many years ago, have likewise dedicated their lives to the doing of the Lord’s will. Yet, actually doing and performing in full accord with the Lord’s will is a struggle. The influences of the world, the adversary, and our own weak flesh hinder us at times from doing the Lord’s will to the extent we would like. Like many endeavors in the Christian walk, the matter of doing the Lord’s will is something we learn over time, through experience. Our sentiment in all this is that expressed by the psalmist, “Teach me to do thy will.” (Ps. 143:10) Before we can do the Lord’s will, however, we must first know what that will is. This is the primary focus of our lesson—determining the Lord’s will.

Fortunate it is that in many of the day-to-day experiences of life it is quite easy to determine the Lord’s will, both in temporal and spiritual ways. If we are employed, we believe the Lord would be pleased that we go to our job each day and carry it out to the best of our ability. If we have a home, he

would expect us, as part of his will, to take care of it and not let it fall into disrepair. The Lord, we believe, is also pleased that we take reasonable care of our physical bodies and our health. These, and many others, are temporal things, yet they are part of our stewardship, and it is the Lord's will that we take care of these responsibilities as part of our consecration vows. Likewise, concerning the all important spiritual responsibilities of our life, we can easily understand that it is the Lord's will that we come to meetings regularly, attend conventions when possible, spend time in study, prayer, and meditation, speak the gospel message to others, and develop a character in the likeness of our head, Jesus. These are all part of God's will.

GOD'S WILL NOT ALWAYS OBVIOUS

The focus of our lesson, however, is not so much the clear-cut matters described above, important though they are, but on the experiences of life in which the Lord's will is not so obvious. Suffice it to say that in some experiences it is difficult to determine God's will and, in those cases, we need assistance and help to make such a determination. The Scriptures set some 'ground rules' for helping us determine God's will. The first rule is that we cannot determine God's will in an experience by using worldly, or fleshly, thinking. "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." (Rom. 12:2) Notice that the will of God is proven by having our mind transformed from 'this world' and renewed by the indwelling of God's Holy Spirit. To

put it another way, we must use godlike, or Christ-like, thinking—spiritual thinking—to determine the Lord’s will. The second ground rule for determining the Lord’s will is that, in order to do so, our walk must be circumspect. The Apostle Paul makes this connection between walking circumspectly and understanding the will of the Lord using these words, “See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, Redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Wherefore be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is.”—Eph. 5:15-17

A SCRIPTURAL TOUCHSTONE

Even with these ground rules, though, we sometimes struggle in our determining of the Lord’s will. God, in his great love, has provided tools to help us in this endeavor. One such tool is found in this touchstone scripture, “Thine ears shall hear a word behind thee, saying, This is the way, walk ye in it, when ye turn to the right hand, and when ye turn to the left.” (Isa. 30:21) We note in this scripture the fact that God knows we will face experiences in life which present us with a choice to go either in one direction or another. When we come upon such experiences we should realize that we have not sinned because we face a fork in the road, but we have come to a point at which we need to be especially guided by God in our decision making. The ‘word behind thee’ is not to be considered literal, but figurative, referring to the tools we have to help us. These tools or methods that say symbolically, ‘this is the way, walk ye in it’ are suggested as follows: 1) Prayer; 2) The Word of God; 3) The brethren; 4) Family; and 5) Experiences/God’s providence.

Having begun by following the ground rules of spiritual thinking and walking circumspectly, prayer becomes an important ‘word’ behind us to assist in determining the Lord’s will. Prayer, in fact, should be used in conjunction with all the other tools we will discuss. Indeed, Jesus in his model prayer asked, “Thy will be done.” (Matt. 6:10) The Apostle Paul describes prayer as the final piece of the Christian armor, saying, “Praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints.” (Eph. 6:18) Notice that this verse states not only to pray, but also to watch. As we utilize prayer to seek the Lord’s will, let us remember to then watch—watch for God’s leadings, watch for experiences in which his will might be revealed, and watch through the other tools mentioned earlier. In one or more of these ‘watchings’ the Lord’s will may become evident to us.

“Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation.” (Matt. 26:41) In contrast with the previous scripture, Jesus here says to watch first, and then pray. This means to show our desire, interest, and attentiveness before we pray to God about a matter by displaying a watchful attitude, even before going to the throne of heavenly grace. Thus, we are to watch, pray, and then continue to watch for his will to be revealed to us. The importance of prayer cannot be stressed enough. We must talk to the Heavenly Father—after all, it is his will that we want to know, and have covenanted to do. We should be prompt to talk to the very one whose will we are trying to do and to whom we are striving to please.

GOD'S WORD AN IMPORTANT TOOL

Another important tool which speaks as a 'word behind' us is the Scriptures themselves—the Word of God. "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works." (II Tim. 3:16,17) Paul here says that scripture—the Word of God—is used for 'instruction,' so that we might be prepared for 'good works.' These good works, and our doing of them, are part of his will for us, and so, to determine what works he would be pleased to have us engage in, we go to the Scriptures and find the 'instruction in righteousness' which they provide.

The primary work which the Scriptures teach us to be engaged in, as part of God's will for us, is the work of sanctification. Note these words from Jesus and the Apostle Paul, "Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth." "This is the will of God, even your sanctification." (John 17:17; I Thess. 4:3) As these verses indicate, it is God's Word which sanctifies, and it is God's will that this work of sanctification take place. This thought presents a constant truth concerning the Lord's will—that which does not sanctify, or set us apart for the Lord, cannot be his will for us.

Another constant truth about the Lord's will, which we find in the Word of God, is this, "In every thing give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you." (I Thess. 5:18) In other words, that which does not inculcate a feeling of thanks to God also cannot have any part in being his will for us. The Bible, God's Word, is the

ultimate and infallible word behind us in decision making. However, we must use it, study it, and make it our own, for it to truly help us in determining the Lord's will. If we do not utilize its help, we place ourselves at a great disadvantage. Rather, as we seek to know more fully God's will, let us go to the Scriptures, continuing also to watch and pray.

BRETHREN AND FAMILY AS ADDITIONAL HELPS

A third tool God has graciously given as a word behind us is our brethren, fellow members of the body of Christ. Many times it is these who assist us in determining the Lord's will when it otherwise seems unclear. Paul on numerous occasions spoke of the fact that brethren in one place were instrumental in helping those somewhere else, most often by way of example. One such comment was directed to the brethren of Thessalonica, "Ye were ensamples to all that believe in Macedonia and Achaia." (I Thess. 1:7) We too, have the privilege of looking to the ecclesia, either collectively or individually, as a source of example and help as we seek to determine the Lord's will. Addressing the elders of the ecclesia, the Apostle Peter said, "Being ensamples to the flock." (I Pet. 5:3) At times, it may be helpful to look to the elders of the ecclesia, either by personal contact with them, or by their example, to gain insight into the Lord's will. However, this is not just the responsibility of elders, nor should we only look to them for guidance. We all should be examples, and willing to help each other in times when ascertaining the will of God is difficult. We all have the privilege to do as Paul admonished Timothy, "Be thou an example of the believers, in

word, in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity.”—I Tim. 4:12

It is important to remind ourselves that this important tool of the brethren cannot be of use to us unless we have regular contact with them. This can be through regular meetings together, other opportunities for fellowship, cards, letters, phone calls, and e-mail. All of these are means by which we can utilize this tool to assist us in determining God’s will. We must remember these words from Paul, “Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching.”—Heb. 10:25

Our natural families can also be a useful tool of assistance to us as we seek to determine the Lord’s will, especially if they are also brethren, members of the household of faith. The Apostle Paul recounted the great and positive impact that Timothy’s natural family had in his development as a young man, stating, “I thank God, whom I serve from my forefathers with pure conscience, that without ceasing I have remembrance of thee in my prayers night and day; When I call to remembrance the unfeigned faith that is in thee, which dwelt first in thy grandmother Lois, and thy mother Eunice; and I am persuaded that in thee also.” (II Tim. 1:3,5) It is obvious from Paul’s words that the faith possessed first by his grandmother and then his mother had been of much influence in the life of young Timothy, and had most likely helped him on many occasions find needed answers as to what the will of the Lord was.

We should ask ourselves, ‘Am I giving heed to those words and examples I see around me in

decision making?’ Conversely, ‘Am I showing forth the proper words and examples to others who may need assistance in decision making?’ This is a two-way proposition—we can benefit from others in seeking the Lord’s will, and we can also help others in doing the same thing, all by seeing, and being, examples one to another.

GOD’S PROVIDENCE IN EXPERIENCES

The fifth, and last, tool we want to discuss as an aid in determining the Lord’s will is certainly not least in importance or value. Our experiences, and God’s providence in them, are a most valuable and indispensable tool in ascertaining the Lord’s will. Experience, it is said, is the best teacher. We can know much in the way of God’s will for us by rightly learning from our experiences. Paul expresses our progression through experience this way, “We glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulation worketh patience; And patience, experience; and experience, hope: And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit which is given unto us.” (Rom. 5:3-5) True maturity, both naturally and spiritually, comes best through experience. Paul spoke of his own spiritual maturity by using the example of the natural man, “When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.”—I Cor. 13:11

We are to claim God’s promises in our experiences, remembering that his providence is always there to guide, if we are submissive to him. “My God shall supply all your need according to his

riches in glory by Christ Jesus.” (Phil. 4:19) Seeing the Lord’s will through our experiences is part of being properly exercised by them, as Paul says, “Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby.” (Heb. 12:11) If we truly believe that our experiences are ‘tailor-made’ then we should be alert because the Lord’s will just might be indicated in them. As the words of the hymn say, “Looking back, I’ll praise the way, thou hast led me, day by day.”

THE HOLY SPIRIT NECESSARY

One very important element which allows all of the aforementioned tools to work together in harmony is the Holy Spirit—God’s power and influence directed in our lives. Note that the previously mentioned scripture which spoke of walking circumspectly (Eph. 5:15,17) is immediately followed by these words, “Be filled with the Spirit.” (Eph. 5:18) It is this Holy Spirit which works with our New Creature mind to help us use all these tools to their best possible benefit in assisting us to determine the Lord’s will. Therefore, as we utilize the first tool of prayer and watching, we should include in our prayers the request for more of the Holy Spirit’s guidance in seeking God’s will.

Summarizing these tools as they relate to the touchstone scripture of Isaiah 30:21, we see that we are to use prayer, the Bible, the brethren, our family, and the experiences of life as words behind us, saying figuratively, ‘Here is the way, here is the Lord’s will.’ The word ‘behind’ also implies that

although we have these tools, we must still proceed with the eye of faith. We are not looking for, nor will God give us, a miraculous vision of what his will is, but by faith we should see his direction as we use the tools he has given us. “We walk by faith, not by sight.”—II Cor. 5:7

MAKING NEEDED DECISIONS

Let us suppose, however, that an experience comes upon us, and in spite of our best efforts to use all the tools provided to assist us in determining God’s will, the path to choose remains unclear. Additionally, let us suppose we are faced with a decision which must be made. What should we do? First, we should continue to pray and watch, and not stop using all of the other tools given to us. Second, we must claim the precious promises, “We know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.” “I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.” (Rom. 8:28; Heb. 13:5) Third, we should then make the very best decision we can in the matter, being firm in it, not wavering, and carrying it through. We should be full of faith that God, who knows our very hearts, will guide our decision in some way. In such cases, we should pray again, after making a decision, asking God to overrule according to his will that our decision will be made to work to our best spiritual welfare, and watching for his further providence in the matter.

We must always remember that God’s hand is not short—he can and will overrule. “Is my hand shortened at all, that it cannot redeem? or have I

no power to deliver? behold, at my rebuke I dry up the sea, I make the rivers a wilderness.” “Behold, the LORD’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear.” (Isa. 50:2; 59:1) These promises are all by faith, and such experiences in which the Lord’s will is not made clear to us may actually be permitted as a test of our faith.

DOING GOD’S WILL THE ULTIMATE GOAL

The key to success in the narrow way is not only determining the Lord’s will, but actually doing it, to the best of our imperfect ability. This requires action on our part. “If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them.” (John 13:17) The Apostle James states the matter with these words, “Be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves. But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed.”—James 1:22,25

If we follow the ground rules of spiritual thinking and a circumspect walk; if we use the tools of prayer, the Word of God, the assistance of our brethren and families, our past experiences and providences; if we make the best decisions we can; if we use the guiding influence of the Holy Spirit; if we are watchful, claim the precious promises, and have an unwavering faith, we cannot fail. In so doing, let us echo the words of Jesus, “I can of mine own self do nothing . . . I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me. My meat is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work.”—John 5:30; 4:34 ■