

I. Introduction

If you could ask God any question, what would it be? Any question. Would it be for clarity regarding something mysterious? “What really happened to Amelia Erhart?” Would it be for an answer to a big, philosophical question regarding the nature of the universe? Would it be about something personal: “Why did you make me this way?”

I don’t know what most people would ask God. But I do know the one question that multiple professors and pastors told me people would ask, the one question that R.C. Sproul said he heard more than any other: “What is God’s will for my life?”

Now, this question comes in different forms, surrounding different topics or circumstances—but it’s a question that many of us have asked—especially as we think about decisions. Each of us, surely, has prayed to God for guidance for certain decisions. We’ve asked God: What do you want me to do!? Should I marry this person? Should I take this job? Move to this city? Have children?

Don’t you want to know the will of God? If you are a Christian, you should! You should want to know what the will of God is, because you know that living inside the will of God is so much better for you than to try and resist the will of a good, loving God. We recognize that we want guidance.

We all want to know the will of God.

Ground Work: Distinguishing God’s Sovereign Will and God’s Moral Will

But before we can ask ourselves how to know the will of God, we have to understand what we mean when we say: The will of God. And there are a lot of different nuances around “the will of God” that we could talk about, but I want to make one important distinction before we get much farther this morning: That there is a difference between God’s “sovereign will” and God’s “moral will.”

God’s Sovereign Will: What *will* happen because God has freely ordained it as a part of his overarching, universal plan of redemption and glory.

In this sense, it is impossible to live outside of God’s will. This is the sense in which those who killed Jesus *were* doing God’s will: “this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God” (Acts 2:23).¹ God’s sovereign will *cannot* be broken. What God wills, happens!

¹ The church then confirms this theology even more forcefully two chapters later, as they pray: “truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place” (Acts 4:27-28).

God's Moral Will: What God commands us to do in his perfect moral goodness and divine authority.

In this sense, it is perfectly possible to live outside of God's will. Those who killed Jesus were not doing God's will, they were sinning egregiously, and bear the responsibility for their actions: "you crucified and killed by the hands of *lawless* men... repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:23, 38). God's moral will *can* be broken. People break it every second. What God wills for us, we scoff at and ignore and hate.

So, two different ways the Bible talks about God's will: His sovereign will and his moral will.

Ground Work: The Bible's Focus on Knowing God's Moral Will

Here is why I go into all that just to start this sermon today: I want to make this very clear because what I think stands out as soon as you start reading the Bible is that **the Bible is much more concerned that we know God's *moral will* than it is concerned that we know God's *sovereign will*.** It's much more concerned that we know *how to act* than *what the future holds*.

Let me give you some examples. In James 4, Jesus's brother James talks about God's sovereign will:

"Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit"— ¹⁴yet you do not know what tomorrow will bring. What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes. ¹⁵Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that." ¹⁶As it is, you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil."

Now, note what James says here: He says in our day-to-day planning, we have a kind of arrogant posture that assumes we know the future. But really, we don't! Life could end tomorrow! You don't know what tomorrow will bring!

So, what does James say? Does he say: "So, pray to God and ask him to show you what will happen tomorrow? Ask for a dream, a vision, a sense of supernatural assurance and peace about what will happen tomorrow? Ask God to tell you his sovereign will?"

No. He says: "Adopt a different posture. Make plans—but do so with a posture of humble submission to the plans of God."

We also see this kind of humbling attitude toward God's sovereign will in Proverbs. Proverbs 19:21- **"Many are the plans in the mind of a man, but it is the purpose of the Lord that will stand."**

Now, sometimes the Bible gives us very clear promises about the future—Jesus is coming back, you will be resurrected, Satan and evil and death will be defeated. But most of what the future holds is known only to God—and about that, the Bible largely says: Make peace with that reality.

But, of course, there are places in the Bible that seem to be encouraging us to “learn” the will of God! But what those are most often referring to is not God’s sovereign will, but his *moral* will.

Listen to how King David speaks in Psalm 143:

**⁸ Let me hear in the morning of your steadfast love,
for in you I trust.
Make me know the way I should go,
for to you I lift up my soul...**

**¹⁰ Teach me to do your will,
for you are my God!
Let your good Spirit lead me
on level ground!**

What is David talking about here? **“Make me know the way I should go, for to you I lift up my soul... Teach me to do your will, for you are my God!”** David isn’t saying, Lord, teach me what is going to happen. He’s saying: “You are my God, I’ve submitted myself to worshipping you, I know your ways are best, I want to please you—so teach me how to do so!

Now, when you get to the New Testament, you get this same kind of emphasis: that you can *learn* or *grow* in knowing and acting in God’s will. Let me give you a couple examples:

- Romans 12:1-2 – **“I appeal to you, therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”**

What is the context here? Why are you meant to “discern” what is the will of God? In order to offer all of life as a holy, acceptable, sacrifice of spiritual worship to God. To know the will of God is to know and act in accordance with holiness. Paul makes this even more clear in 1 Thessalonians 4:

- 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8 – **“For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor... that no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter...For God has not called us for impurity, but in holiness.”**

Paul says, the will of God, is for you to grow in holiness. That’s what sanctification is. The will of God for your life is to be made holy.

To be a Christian is to grow in one's understanding of and alignment with the will of God—which is not about knowing the future, but knowing God's moral character and acting in accordance with it. That is what it means to be living in the will of God.

Main Point

So, all of that is introduction this morning. But here's the thing:

It's one thing to know God's moral will in abstract but working that out in everyday life is going to look a little different for everybody. We all live in different places in different times, with different relationships and responsibilities, different trials and temptations. It looked different for Abraham than it did for Joseph, different for King David than it did for the Apostle Paul. And this is where wisdom comes in.

In Psalm 119:66, the Psalmist pleads with the Lord: **“Teach me good judgment and knowledge, for I believe in your commandments. Before I was afflicted I went astray, but now I keep your word.”** The Psalmist acknowledges that previously, he'd “gone astray”—but now he loves God, loves his Word and his commandments, and he's asking the Lord: “Teach me good judgment!” And literally, that word for judgment in Hebrew means: “taste.” Give me good tastebuds, Lord.

So, this is where we're going today: **Wisdom is knowing and doing the will of God not in the abstract, but in the concrete, practical scenarios of life. And the primary way that God calls us to grow in that kind of wisdom is by developing spiritual tastebuds for his will.**

Developing Tastebuds for God's Will

Okay, so how do we do this? How do we develop tastebuds for God's will? How do we—as Romans 12 says, renew our minds that we might be able to discern God's will? I want to give you three steps—three steps to developing this kind of godly wisdom.

I originally came across these steps in a little book by Sinclair Ferguson called *Discovering God's Will*. He doesn't expand on them, he just kind of references them offhand, but I thought they were incredibly helpful in describing what it looks like to develop this taste for the word of God. So, thanks Dr. Ferguson for pointing me in the right direction.²

So, the three Steps: Study the Word, Submit the Heart, Seek the Spirit.

Step 1: Study the Word (Knowledge of God)

The first step to developing a taste for God's will is by studying his Word. *Because, in God's Word, God has clearly, infallibly spoken!*

² Ferguson references these as the combination that leads to the “good discernment”—or literally, “good taste”—that Psalm 119:66 speaks of. Sinclair Ferguson, *Discovering God's Will* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1982), 35.

If someone came to me and said, help me, pastor, I'm trying to learn how to love my wife well, but I don't know how! I can't figure out how to make her happy! The first thing I might say to them is: Well, have you asked her? Have you had a conversation about what makes her feel loved, feel appreciated? Ask her that, then listen to her words! Really listen to her, take notes! You can try to read her all day long, you can do trial and error and try to figure out what she responds best to, but the best way to know how she feels is to ask her! And the same is true of God!

In his Word, he has spoken clearly to us. He has told us what he wants from us, what holiness looks like. He's given us examples of how he has worked in history, how saints have acted and sought him for thousands of years, and what he loves and what he hates. His Word gives us a clear picture of him, directly from him.

And the thing is, transforming you by renewing your mind is exactly what God gave us the Bible *for*! It's intended to do that. Let me show you how we know that.

1. When God speaks, he intends something to happen.

When he spoke "Let there be light," he intended light to spring into existence. And it did. Because, as he says in Isaiah 55—his word does not return void, but it accomplishes that which God intends it to (Is. 55:11). So, when God speaks, he intends something to happen, and he always accomplishes it.

So, what is the Bible, the written Words of God, intended to accomplish?

2. The Bible is intended to bring about our sanctification.

Listen to what Paul tells Timothy in 2 Timothy 3:

¹⁶ All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

So, Paul says "Scripture"—that is the sacred writings, the written Word of God—is given by God (breathed out) and intended for a very specific purpose: "...**that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.**" The man or woman of God who is looking to be "complete", looking to be holy, looking to do the will of God in the world—he or she has been given the Bible *exactly* for that purpose! And the purpose of God will not be thwarted! So, friends, we cannot be a people who are in tune with the will of God, who have a taste for the will of God, if we are not in the Word of God.

So, you've got to hear me right here. What I'm not saying is that every time you face a decision, you flip open the Word of God to a random page, and just the right verse will pop out. Now, that could happen, God very often will hit you with what seems to be a *random* verse or sermon text that is just the right thing at just the right time.

But what we're talking about, developing spiritual discernment, taste, doesn't happen in the moment of decision-making. It happens in the slow, quiet moments over a lifetime. It happens as we get to know the principles of holiness over the course of a lifetime.

It's kind of like what we talked about with getting to know your spouse. If my strategy to understand my wife's desires is simply to ask every year: "What would you like me to get you for our anniversary?" I'm going to have a bad time! I might sometimes get very clear answers, but you also are probably going to have a very stilted relationship. Because the way to love your spouse well is not to ask for perfectly clear direction in every scenario, but to listen closely and observe attentively over the course of a lifetime—to come to *know* her! And over time you get to know, instinctively, how to love and serve and please her well.

That's the kind of relationship with God—and with his Word—that we are meant to have. It's not a Magic-8 Ball to be periodically consulted. It's meant to be a marinade, a marinade of God's character—and the longer we sit and soak in it, the more we take on the flavor of God himself.

So: sign up for a Bible study.

So, step 1 is to Study the Word. But the Bible *by itself* is not enough to make us in tune with God's will. Satan knows God's Word. And he hates God's will. The Bible isn't enough, simply as a book by itself, because head knowledge has to actually turn into heart attitude and action. So, there are two more steps.

Step 2: Submit the Heart (Obedience to God)

The second step for getting in tune with the will of God is to submit the heart to God. Here's the basic principle at play here: Knowing God's will is going to be utterly useless for you if you are not committed to obeying.

So, a critical step in discerning the Will of God is consciously, actively submitting our will to God's will. Let me just give you one example of how crucial this is.

In Ezekiel 20, a group of leaders in Israel come to the prophet Ezekiel to "inquire of the Lord" (Ez. 20:1). They're looking for guidance. They're looking to know the will of God for the nation. Now, the Bible doesn't tell us what kind of guidance, what topic, they were looking for. But it doesn't really matter. Because this is what the Lord says to them, through his prophet: **"Is it to inquire of me that you come? As I live, declares the Lord God, I will not be inquired of by you."**

God says to the elders of Israel: I will not answer your request for guidance. And why? Why such a harsh response? Well, God goes on to list all the ways that he had saved Israel, redeemed them, been gracious to them—and all the ways that Israel had been unfaithful to him. And he finally, says: **"When you present your gifts and offer up your children in fire, you defile yourselves with all your idols to this day. And shall I be inquired of you, O house of**

Israel? As I live, declares the Lord God, I will not be inquired of by you... Go serve every one of you his idols, now and hereafter, if you will not listen to me; but my holy name you shall no more profane with your gifts and idols.”

See, Israel had proven—not merely in the past, but *to this day*—that they didn’t have a heart of obedience. They didn’t really want to know what God wanted, they wanted to know what they had to say or sacrifice to ensure their temporary comfort.

And too often, this is true of us. We come to the Lord in a moment of desperation, saying, “I need you to tell me what to do!” But we’ve disobeyed his clear commands in Scripture regularly, without a heart of repentance, without a sincere striving to kill our sin. We’ve submitted ourselves to the slavery of sexual sin, we’ve ignored his commands to worship him weekly with his people, we’ve run from his prompting to reconcile with our neighbor—and a thousand other things.

We’ve proven—again and again—that we are not worried about conforming to the will of God, we’re just trying to avoid making a hard decision and looking to pawn it off on God. We don’t want God’s direction in every moment of our lives, we want a magic-8 ball we can pull off the shelf when the weight of a choice is too heavy for us to bear. We don’t want God to *rule* over us, we want him to give us optional suggestions when we approach him.

And to that kind of heart, God says: “I will not be inquired of by you.”

Brothers and sisters—he’s not a genie to be summoned only when you require him! He’s God! And he will be treated as such. If you truly want to be on the path of blessing, a path guided by God himself, then it must be with a heart that is committed to obedience.

And a heart that is committed to being obedient to God has to be aligned with God’s ultimate purposes. And God’s ultimate purpose for your life is this: That you would be sanctified—made holy—in order to reflect the image of God and his Son, Jesus Christ, in the world, that he would be glorified and that you would learn to be satisfied in him.

That’s God’s goal: His glory and your ultimate good. But you have to recognize, that that means your immediate comfort isn’t always his goal. Your financial prosperity isn’t always his goal. Your success and sparkling reputation aren’t always his goal. Your holiness is his goal. Your learning how to depend upon him is his goal. Your learning to be satisfied in him is his goal—and sometimes, perhaps even often, that goal can only be accomplished by temporary setback, suffering, defeat.

See, if you want God to speak to you because you want to make sure that the job you take will lead to the most comfortable life for your family—then what you’re looking for is a supernatural guide to attain your will, not necessarily God’s. If you want to hear from God because you want to make the right business decision, so that your reputation as a successful person is intact—you want a business coach, not a God.

And don't get me wrong: God cares about those things. He cares about your job, he cares about your family life, those are decisions you should bring to him! But you need to know that his ways are not man's ways. His goals are not the world's goals.

They're better. Eternally, infinitely better.

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.” (Prov. 3:5-6)—and your destination satisfying.

Step 3: Seek the Spirit (Guidance from God)

This is our final point, that to develop a taste for the will of God, then we must regularly put ourselves in a humble posture of seeking him, seeking supernatural, spiritual guidance from God.

Here is the problem with leaving our sermon today with just those first two points: They could be done in a totally non-Christian mindset.

I can go about life thinking that all I need to get the ultimate guidance is just search this ancient book for the right answers and commit myself to obeying its precepts. But you could be a Muslim and do that same thing. You could be a Buddhist and do that same thing. You could follow the teachings of Confucius or the ancient Greek philosophers. And so many professing Christians approach the Christian life in basically the same way: Replace the Quran with the Bible. Replace Plato with the Bible.

But one the differences between all of those other things and Christianity is that God is real, living, personal God! Being a Christian is not simply about a way of life, it's about having a relationship with the God of the universe through his Son, Jesus Christ.

If that's true, then we should expect that God *wants* to guide us! He wants to answer our prayers. He wants to respond to our humble, obedient seeking. We're not just delving the depths of an ancient book—there's a person on the other side of those pages!

And the Bible reiterates that again and again.

Jesus says it, in Luke 11, when he says: **“What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”**

Jesus says: God loves to give gifts to his children! Why wouldn't you ask him? He'll give you his very Spirit to help you make decisions!

James, Jesus's brother, says it even more forcefully in one of my favorite verses in all the Bible. James 1:5 says: **"If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him."**

Again, James grounds this confidence in the good generosity of God: He gives generously to all without reproach, without rebuke. And he says: If you ask for wisdom, God's going to give it! It *will* be given him. Now, of course, the caveats that we have said already still hold: If you're saying a quick prayer—but not going to God's Word for wisdom; if you're saying a quick prayer—but you have a heart hardened toward the commands of God—then you shouldn't presume upon the grace of God. But if you are a child of God who is humbly approaching the Father's throne with the heart that longs for God's glory and the magnifying of Jesus's name, then you should expect, you should bank on, God giving you wisdom!

In fact, James goes on to say just that: **"But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways."**

James says, if you doubt that God will give you wisdom, if God is just one potential source of help in your time of trouble—one who may come through, but may not—then there is a heart problem that is going to get in the way of receiving wisdom from God. When you're looking for direction, we are not meant to treat God like a Magic-8 ball OR like a lottery ticket—the shot in the dark, Plan C, D, or E when everything else failed.

But that's not who he is! He's not a genie or a lottery ticket. God is the source of every ounce of spiritual wisdom that we could ever want or need—we're meant to treat him like an overflowing fountain that will unfailingly quench our thirst.

So, if we are going to be a people who have a taste for the will of God—we must be a people who regularly seek the Spirit.

1. The Spirit speaks most clearly in the Word. So go to the Word with a breath of gratitude, inquiry, and communion with the Spirit.
2. The Spirit fills and speaks through the Body of Christ. So go to your brothers and sisters with an ear attuned to hear from God.
3. The Spirit fills and speaks to you. So, as you grow in your knowledge of the Word, by his leading, expect to have more and more clear, though subjective, feelings of peace or unsettledness in a variety of situations.
4. The Spirit is the spirit of Jesus Christ. So, expect him to point you toward dependence on and imitation of Jesus.

Look, you might be sitting here and just thinking: "Pastor, this all sounds well and good, but I just don't trust that I'll even be able to hear the Spirit's voice, even if he does speak to me! I have

made such a mess of my life, I don't feel like I know my Bible. I know that my heart has been unwilling to obey God for so long—I honestly don't know if God would want to speak to me, and I don't have any clue if I could tell if he did.”

And that's a fair reservation. I've had that reservation.

But if that's the case, then here's what you need to hear this morning: Jesus Christ is the wisdom of God who has been given for you. Perhaps you remember that from the beginning of this series. When we talk about seeking wisdom, about being formed to be wise, God's-will-tasting people—it all starts and ends with Jesus.

You may not know your Bible well right now. But Jesus did. He knew it so well he could fight off temptations from the devil himself, no matter how innocuous the devil's temptations may have seemed, Jesus knew the taste of godliness because he had searched the Scriptures.

You may not always have the perfect heart of obedience. But Jesus did. He could pray to his Father in the Garden of Gethsemane with such stress that he sweat drops of blood, saying: “Father, if there is any way to accomplish your plan without this path of suffering and death, if there is any way to skip by this cup of wrath—that is what I want! But not my will, but your will be done.”

You may not always feel in tune with the Spirit of God. But Jesus was. And so after he prayed to the Father to ask him to take the cup of suffering away, he could hear the sound of soldiers approaching and know, beyond a shadow of a doubt—that God had answered his prayer, and that he was being called not to run, but to face his accusers; called not to summon an army of angels, but to suffer a death for many.

And brothers and sisters, if you have believed on that Suffering Savior for salvation, believing that he did all that for your sake and now lives and reigns over all the universe—then you have been united to Jesus and filled with his Spirit. When the Father looks at you in your humble repentance and dependence on his Son—he loves you no less than he loves his very Son. When the Spirit fills you and empowers you to live in tune with the will of God—he is the very spirit of Jesus who did that perfectly, the spirit of Jesus who you love and worship and have placed your hope upon. You're not seeking some vague, impersonal spiritual force—you're seeking the Spirit of your Savior.

There is a person on the other side of your seeking—and it's your God, your King, your Savior, your Friend. Let us be a people who listen for the Spirit's voice and long to listen and obey.