

Discerning the Will of God

Acts 16:1-18

OPENING ILLUSTRATION:

With the passing of **Steve Jobs** I think we have all been recounting the benefits of the new technological gadgets that Jobs and people like him have introduced in the last couple of decades. I love my IPOD, my IPAD I love my MacBook Pro.

But if I had to name the single most revolutionary device that I've purchased in the last 20 years, without controversy the answer would be my **GPS**. However, it has never been completely settled who invented GPS technology. Various individuals from various branches of the military all submitted ideas.

Ultimately a series of over 30 satellites were launched into orbit, each inclined 55 degrees to the equator. These satellites orbit about 20,000 km from the earth's surface and make two orbits per day. The orbits are designed so that there are always 6 satellites in view from most places on earth.

Combined with emergency technology provided by **local dispatchers** modern GPS can not only get you from point A to point B, they can also help you navigate around traffic accidents, road blocks and delays.

I don't have to think about how the little unit gets all of its information. I just have to turn left when it says turn left.

Wouldn't it be nice if life was that simple? If there was a God Positioning System?

- You want to know what car to buy and it says - buy the chevy.
- You want to know what job to take and it says - move to Idaho
- You want to know who to marry and it says - marry the brunette
- You get off course and it says, "recalculating"

Before the technological revolution there were basically two ways of navigation.

1. A good set of tools and precise measurements.

They carried a series of tools, a compass, maps, crosstaff, quadrant and a sextant. They relied on the position of stars, the rising and setting sun, relative to the horizon. They gathered information and employed a series of precise calculations and were able to navigate our planet remarkably well. But it took time, and a lot of practice to master.

Discerning God's will is similarly challenging.

2. Following the herd.

When the Bible speaks of God's will it seems to divide it into 2 categories.

- There is the moral will of God - Don't lie, don't commit adultery, don't worship idols, ect. Those are clear cut, revealed in scripture, easy one.
- There is the specific will of God

This is how God plans to use you in a very practical way to bring Him glory.

This would include,

- Your Occupation
- Who you will marry
- How many kids will you have
- When will you have kids
- Where will you live
- How you will serve in the local Church

Those things are not clearly revealed in scripture. I cannot turn to a verse that says, "Zach Terry should be a preacher, thus saith the Lord".

KEY THOUGHT: Like ancient navigation God has given us a set of tools to help triangulate our position relative to where we are going. You need to know what they are if you are going to navigate life well.

CONTEXT: So far we have tracked the Apostle Paul through his first and the beginning of his 2nd missionary journey. In Acts 16 for the first time the future seems unclear. He has to do some recalculating. The Holy Spirit slows things down and allows us to see how Paul navigated life. **I see at least 5 tools Paul used to discern what was next.**

TEXT: Acts 16 (NASB95) ¹ Paul came also to Derbe and to Lystra. And a disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek, ² and he was well spoken of by the brethren who were in Lystra and Iconium. ³ Paul wanted this man to go with him; and he took him and circumcised him because of the Jews who were in those parts, for they all knew that his father was a Greek.

Ok Paul had Timothy circumcised what does that have to do with finding God's will? This shows us the first step to navigating life was that Paul was...

1. Are you Gospel Driven?

You see in Galatians 5:2 (NASB95)

2 Behold I, Paul, say to you that if you receive circumcision, Christ will be of no benefit to you.

Why did Paul get Timothy circumcised on this occasion?

Consider these facts:

1. No one is demanding his circumcision
2. There is no link to salvation
3. There is no theological principle involved.

This decision for circumcision was **missional** in it's nature. On another occasion he adamantly refused to circumcise Titus.

Some have said Paul was inconsistent in this practice. But the truth is Paul was **CONSISTENTLY GOSPEL DRIVEN**.

Evangelizing a highly religious but unconverted individual is very different from evangelizing a person with no religious background.

APPLICATION: You have to settle the fact that God's primary goal is to Glorify Himself through advancing the person and work of Jesus.

THINK ABOUT IT - Everything you do in the Christian life you will do better in Heaven. You will pray better, sing better, serve better... but the one thing you cannot do in Heaven is influence anyone with the Gospel.

That is the primary motivation of life. Now is that your primary motivation?

Do you go to work as a missionary?

Do you go to school as a missionary?

Do you live in your neighborhood as a missionary?

If your primary goal in life is to achieve some american ideal - you stand no chance of discerning God's will.

YOU MUST RECALCULATE.

- Paul was willing to have Timothy circumcised for the sake of the Gospel.
- Paul was willing to change his name for the sake of the Gospel.
- Paul was willing to receive 39 lashes 5 times for the sake of the Gospel.
- Paul was willing to leave the comforts of Tarsus for the sake of the Gospel.
- Paul was willing to be shipwrecked for the sake of the Gospel.

IN Ephesians Paul wrote that the Armor of God includes boots, he says your feet are to be shod with the preparation of the Gospel of peace. That speaks of the direction, path, motivation of your life -

Without controversy Paul was **GOSPEL DRIVEN**.

2. Are you Submissive to Authority?

⁴ Now while they were passing through the cities, they were delivering the decrees which had been decided upon by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem, for them to observe. ⁵ So the churches were being strengthened in the faith, and were increasing in number daily.

Remember we saw a couple of weeks ago the controversy that led to the counsel at Jerusalem. The question was, "Does a person have to become a Jew first in order to become a Christian?" The question was decisively answered. It was settled.

How was it settled? The Apostles and Elders settled it. There was no congregational vote, this was a doctrinal matter and God had a pattern for resolving such matters.

APPLICATION: In every area of life God has given very clear structures of authority that he uses to direct his children.

- You have **Governmental Authority**... if it's illegal it's not God's will. The Bible says that no king is king by accident God puts those people in authority.
- You have **Employment Authority**... you want to know what to do at work, ask your boss. I don't like his idea, it doesn't matter he is the authority.
- You have **Parental Authority**... children are commanded to obey their parents in the Lord for this is right.

But God didn't speak to Paul through Governmental Authority, or Parental Authority... but through **Spiritual authority**.

In **Heb. 13:7** we read: "Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the Word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation."

The expression, "them which have the rule over you," is one word in Greek. The literal meaning is "those who are leading the way." These are leaders who were preachers and teachers of the Word of God, and they are the ones to be remembered in a special way.

What is translated as "obey" means to give assent. It is the duty of those who hear the pastor-teachers preach the Word to bring themselves in an attitude of mental and spiritual assent, agreement. If one listens with a negative attitude thinking that what one hears is not for himself, one does his pastor and himself a disservice. One should listen with an open mind and heart.

This speaks of the attitude one has toward the Pastor's and Elders of his church - it calls you to put yourself in a position that is "disposed to persuasion and yielding".

The reason for such a positive attitude toward them is "for they watch over your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you."

Paul did that with the Jerusalem Church - he was carrying out their directives.

APPLICATION: We don't like that. We want to hear from God personally. Listen to me - I and the Pastor's of this church are no more precious to God than you are. You are a priest, you have direct access to Jesus personally. You don't NEED me.

However, God always has and always will work through systems of authority.

- He will lead the household through a husband and father.
- He will lead governments through rulers
- He will lead children through parents
- He will lead church via His Word preached by Pastors.

ILLUSTRATION: It is like being under an umbrella, it doesn't stop the rain falling, it simply keeps you from being hit.

ILLUSTRATION: It's like a megaphone - it is not the voice, it simply amplifies the voices for all to hear.

Paul was motivated by the Gospel... Paul was submissive to authority....

3. Are you Spiritually Sensitive

⁶ They passed through the Phry-gian and Galatian region, **having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit** to speak the word in Asia; ⁷ and after they came to Mysia, they were trying to go into Bithynia, and the **Spirit of Jesus did not permit them;** ⁸ and passing by Mysia, they came down to Troas.

This is something that we don't talk about nearly enough. Maintaining a close, intimate, clean was with the Lord so that you are able to discern His heart on certain matters.

Romans 12:2 (NASB95) 2 And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

LISTEN: You will not be able to hear the still small voice of God with sin in your life. It's like this.... My GPS is incredibly stubborn. Once I plug in my destination it develops the best route for me. If I get off course, it says over and over - "RECALCULATING". And it develops the quickest way for me to get back on track.

ILLUSTRATION: LET'S SUPPOSE God called you to teach a Sunday School class. You didn't like that destination so you got of course. God doesn't say, "Well ok, we'll do it your way". NO! He will say for the next 10 years - you need to teach. You say, "Lord what is your will for me about my job? He will say, we will talk about that in a moment - let's talk about teaching. THAT IS WHAT LORDSHIP IS ALL ABOUT.

David said, “If I regard iniquity in my heart the Lord will not hear me”.

ILLUSTRATION: That is why if a young couple comes to me and tells me they want to get married but they are already being sexually immoral. I will not do the wedding. Why? How can they hear God’s telling them they are supposed to get married if they are not willing to get their hearts clear and get alone with God?? It may be they are motivated by lust more than love!

This is why fast and praying can be helpful when discerning God’s will.

Paul was Gospel driven, Submissive to Authority, Spiritually sensitive...

4. Are you open to God’s Voice?

⁹ A vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing and appealing to him, and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.” ¹⁰ When he had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them. ¹¹ So putting out to sea from Troas, we ran a straight course to Samothrace, and on the day following to Neapolis; ¹² and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia, a Roman colony; and we were staying in this city for some days.

There are times in life when it is easier to discern what God doesn’t want you to do, than what God does want you to do.

LISTEN: When you are clouded by uncertainty wait. God’s word hasn’t spoken... wait.

ILLUSTRATION: I had a church one time tell me that God had told them I was supposed to be their pastor. What they didn’t know was that 3 other churches were telling me the same thing. At some point one of the committees said, “Look we need an answer this week”. I hadn’t heard from God - when you are uncertain about major life decisions.... WAIT!!!

At the right time God will reveal his direction.

But you have to be open to supernatural direction.

ILLUSTRATION: When I was **called to ministry** that wasn’t a vocational decision it was a summons by Almighty God. I wrestled for months with that call before he became clear on a Sunday morning.

ILLUSTRATION: I needed to get clear direction from God about **who I was supposed to marry**.

A couple of times in my life God has spoken through dreams. Many times he has redirected me through an impression or bringing a verse to mind.

YOU SAY: Pastor, how do I get God to speak to me like that? Friend you can't. All you can do is maintain a passionate pursuit of God so that if He does you are ready.

YOU ASK: How can I know if God was speaking to me through that dream- if there is a question at all it was not God.

Paul was Gospel driven, Submissive to Authority, Spiritually sensitive, he was open to supernatural revelation...

5. Are you Watching for Confirmation

Here Paul received both -

a. Positive

¹³ And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to a riverside, where we were supposing that there would be a place of prayer; and we sat down and began speaking to the women who had assembled. ¹⁴ A woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple fabrics, a worshiper of God, was listening; and the Lord opened her heart to respond to the things spoken by Paul. ¹⁵ And when she and her household had been baptized, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come into my house and stay." And she prevailed upon us.

Remember Paul's main motivation was the advancement of the Gospel. THE PLAN IS WORKING. God is giving confirmation.

You have to watch for that - is the path you are on serving either directly or indirectly toward souls being saved?

I enjoy being directly engaged in that. My wife's impact is indirect. She is committed to being a wife to me. NOW LISTEN there are a lot of women in this Church who can do a LOT of other things but only one can be a wife to the Senior Pastor. She creates and incredible environment in our home, she teaches our children, she serves me in absolutely remarkable ways. Is it working? Yes she has a part in every soul I lead to Jesus, every sermon I deliver, every decision I make.

- There are people serving in the nursery this morning - you better believe they are going to be rewarded for freeing us up to study!
- Sunday school teachers will take this message this week and study it and make application to their class. You better believe that they are a part of every victory we celebrate at Capshaw.

If you are a servant of Jesus at this Church - every time we lay someone under the waters of Baptism - listen to the still small voice of Jesus saying - THE PLAN IS WORKING!!!

That's positive confirmation.... but there is also...

b. Negative

¹⁶ It happened that as we were going to the place of prayer, a slave-girl having a spirit of divination met us, who was bringing her masters much profit by fortune-telling. ¹⁷ Following after Paul and us, she kept crying out, saying, "These men are bond-servants of the Most High God, who are proclaiming to you the way of salvation." ¹⁸ She continued doing this for many days. But Paul was greatly annoyed, and turned and said to the spirit, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her!" And it came out at that very moment.

According to Pastor Donnelly the proper Greek construction of the phrase, "The way of salvation" would best be rendered "A way of salvation"

So this demon possessed girl was diluting the affect of the Gospel by saying it was one way among many others.

LISTEN: If our primary motivation is the Gospel. There are untold numbers of demons that have as their primary motivation stopping the Gospel's progress. They hate what we are doing. they want to shut it down.

They will start rumors.

They will sow seeds of discontent.

They will tempt people to sin.

They will mix error with truth.

They will stir up controversy against the clear revelation of scripture.

When you see these happen be certain that we must be on track, Satan isn't happy.

ILLUSTRATION: In football, the entire defense if focused on the guy with the ball, they aren't concerned about the dude sitting on the sidelines. If you aren't getting attacked at all perhaps you are out of the game.

Some people got saved and heard the hymn, "I shall not be moved" and they thought it was the great commission.

Isn't it time you give the devil as much trouble as he's given you?

INVITATION:

- **Are you carefully navigating your way through life using the tools God has given or are you following the herd?**
- **Are you motivated by the Gospel or Your personal ambition?**
- **Are you submissive to Authority or rebellious?**
- **Are you walking in purity able to discern God's leading or are you toying with sin still expecting God to speak?**

- Are you open to Supernatural guidance or Do you have a form of godliness and deny the power thereof?
- Are you watching for confirmation both positive and negative?

QUESTIONS FOR SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION:

1. Can your life best be described as:
 - a. Gospel Driven
 - b. Family Driven
 - c. Career Driven
 - d. Popularity Driven
 - e. Hobby Driven
2. If your life is not Gospel Driven what changes in your thinking and actions need to occur in order to bring your passions into line with God's passion?
3. Who are the authorities in your life?
4. Who is called to submit to your authority?
5. Do you treat those in authority over you the way you expect those who are under your authority to treat you?
6. When is it appropriate to disobey authority?
7. What are some ways you can disagree without usurping authority?
8. Name some things that hinder spiritual sensitivity
9. What are some habits that can help maintain spiritual sensitivity?
10. I have found that the best way to maintain my spiritual sensitivity is by properly managing the first 30 mins of my day. Do you find this to be true for you?
11. Can you identify some occasions when God has supernaturally spoken to you?
12. RESEARCH the Rhema word in scripture as it is mentioned in the passage - "Man shall not live by bread alone but by every (rhema) word that proceeds from the mouth of the Father." Be able to separate the rhema from the logos (written) word of God.
13. What are some ways God has confirmed his path for you in times past both positive and negative.