Guidance Core Seminar Week 3

**Introduction**

*Man, 91, Dies Waiting for Will of God*

Tupelo, Miss.—Walter Houston, described by family members as a devoted Christian, died Monday after waiting seventy years for God to give him clear direction about what to do with his life.

“He hung around the house and prayed a lot, but just never got that confirmation,” his wife Ruby says. “Sometimes he thought he heard God’s voice, but then he wouldn’t be sure, and he’d start the process all over again.”

Houston, she says, never really figured out what his life was about, but felt content to pray continuously about what he might do for the Lord. Whenever he was about to take action, he would pull back, “because he didn’t want to disappoint God or go against him in any way,” Ruby says. “He was very sensitive to always remaining in God’s will. That was primary to him.”

That’s a fake Christian news story as reprinted in Kevin DeYoung’s book, *Just Do Something*. Ridiculous, I know—but probably a little closer to how we really engage decision-making than we’d care to admit.

“He was very sensitive to always remaining in God’s will.”

What exactly does that mean? How do you what God’s will is? How do you know if you’re in it? What happens when you fall out of it?

We’re in week 3 of the *Guidance* core seminar, and that’s our topic for today. What exactly is “God’s Will” and what relevance does it have for how we make decisions?

You’ll recall that our first step in making decisions is to consecrate those decisions to the Lord. To understand the larger context for that decision that He defines. We started fleshing that out last week with the doctrine of God’s providence; today we’ll get into the question of his Will.

We’ll begin by answering what is a surprisingly thorny question, “what is the will of God?” And then apply that to the decisions we’re called to make in life.

**I. What Is the Will of God?**

Well, before we can attempt to answer that question for any particular situation, we need to start by carefully defining our terms. As it turns out, when we turn to Scripture we see that the will of God is used in a variety of contexts and doesn’t always have the same meaning. Traditionally, Christians have referred to the will of God in two ways.

A. God’s will of decree

This is also called God’s “will of providence” and it’s largely what we looked at last week. God always gets his way, and that’s a wonderful thing. How do I know that it’s God’s will for me to be married to \_\_\_\_\_? ‘Cause we’re married. How do I know that it’s God’s will for me to come to CHBC this morning? ‘Cause I’m here. As simple as that. Everything that happens, happens according to God’s will of decree, and everything that God has decreed will, without a doubt, come to pass.

B. God’s will of command

This is also called God’s “will of desire.” In Deuteronomy 29:29, Moses describes this alongside God’s will of decree. “The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.” We don’t know God’s will of decree—everything that will happen. But we do know his commands—and it is absolutely God’s will that we obey them.

So we read in 1 Thessalonians 4:3 Paul says, “This is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality.” So we see that God’s will here is that we be sanctified.

So when you ask the question, “what is God’s will,” you need to be clear what you mean. If what you mean is “what is God’s will of decree” then you’re essentially saying, “what is the future?” And that’s not something that God deems best for us to know, at least not normally. In fact, in James 4 God rebukes us for presuming to know that future. That’s his job, not ours. Then again, if what you mean is “what is God’s will of command,” then the answer is very clear: look in the Bible. As Paul writes in 1 Timothy 3:16, the Scriptures provide what we need to “be complete, equipped for every good work.” The Bible gives us the whole counsel of God’s will.

But of course, in your heart you’re thinking, “AARRRGGHH! I’m not asking a theological question; I just want to know whether it’s God’s will for me to marry Tommy or not.”

Here’s how one author[[1]](#footnote-1) addresses that question:

If we ask, “How can I know the will of God?” we may be asking the wrong question. The Scriptures do not command us to find God’s will for most of life’s choices nor do we have any passage instructing on how it can be determined…Yet we persist in searching for God’s will because decisions require thought and sap energy. We seek relief from the responsibility of decision-making and we feel less threatened by being passive rather than active when making important choices.”

OK, that’s a bit harsh, I’ll admit. We may not always be asking the question, “how can I know God’s will” merely because we’re passive and lazy (though perhaps sometimes???) But he makes a good point: we need to ask the questions the Scriptures lead us to ask. And “is it God’s will for you to marry Tommy” probably isn’t the best question.

**II. What God’s Will is Not**

Before we go any further, let me clarify that last point a bit more by describing what God’s will is *not*. We’ve seen what it is, but let’s look at a common misperception about God’s will.

Here’s Gerald Sittser’s description of a typical way of looking at God’s will:

Conventional understanding of God’s will defines it as a specific pathway we should follow into the future. God knows what this pathway is, and he has laid it out for us to follow. Our responsibility is to discover this pathway—God’s plan for our lives…If and when we make the right choice, we will receive his favor, fulfill our divine destiny and succeed in life…If we choose wrongly, we may lose our way, miss God’s will for our lives, and remain lost forever in an incomprehensible maze[[2]](#footnote-2).

In short, the will of God is not:

* Like a choose-your-own adventure book. Where if you find the right path you go on to glory and if you turn to the wrong page, you die a horrible death in a volcano. God will not be hampered in his will to do you good (Romans 8:28) in all things.
* A fairytale of comfort and happiness. As we’ll see in a few minutes, God cares about our *eternal* happiness more than our temporal happiness. Just because something bad happens doesn’t mean you somehow missed God’s will. It means that God has good in mind for you that’s worth the cost you’re experiencing.
* A target you can somehow miss. You can disobey God’s will of command. But you cannot escape his will of decree. So the fact that you disobeyed God at one juncture in no way means you’re confined to a life that’s only God’s second-best. Yes, there are consequences for sin and foolishness—but even they only operate within God’s great, eternal, sovereign will and plan.

So does God want you to marry Tommy? I suppose the only way to find out is to try. If you succeed in saying “I do” then I guess the answer is yes. “Should I marry Tommy” is a question about God’s will of decree, not his will of command, since Scripture nowhere gives you the answer to that question (other than “NO” if Tommy isn’t a Christian). And except in unusual situations, God doesn’t tell his will of decree. So that may not be the best question to ask. A far better question to ask is, “Is it wise to marry Tommy?” In other words, does it seem that marriage to Tommy is the best way I can see to “seek first his kingdom and his righteousness?” If so, go for it! God will stop you if it’s not his will.

Now, don’t get me wrong, Scripture does lay out principles for how we can make sound decisions, and we’ll cover that in the upcoming weeks. But, what I want to emphasize here is that there’s no secret decoder ring, or secret will of God for your life that you’re responsible for finding. God’s normal way to guide our decisions is the wisdom he’s given us. And a great prayer for all of us is that, by his grace, we would make decisions that turn out to be wiser than we are.

Here’s how one author talks about this:

I’ll never forget my poor beleaguered roommate talking with me after her took a risk and told a nice young lady that he liked her…[I]t turned out she wasn’t interested…But instead of just saying “I’m not interested” or “I don’t like you”…she went all spiritual on him. “I’ve been praying a lot about you,” she demurred, “and the Holy Spirit told me no.” “No?” my confused roommate asked. “No…never,” she replied.

Poor guy—he got rejected, not only by this sweet girl, but by the Holy Spirit. The third person of the Trinity took a break from pointing people to Jesus to tell this girl not to date my roommate. I didn’t know that was in the Spirit’s job description.

This is the sort of accountability-dodging jargon we want to avoid. If you aren’t interested in dating or courtship or marriage or whatever, just say “No thanks” or “Not now,” but please don’t make God the bad guy in your relational messes.

**III. God’s Will for His People**

Well, with all that under our belts, it’s time to look at what God’s will is for us.

1. **His Will is That We Obey**

John 14:21, “Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me.” Obviously, this is God’s will of command, not his will of decree, since within his sovereign providence we sometimes choose to not obey him. But it’s safe to say that for all of us, God’s will is that we obey him.

Now, what implications does that have for our decisions? Two things:

* Most obviously, we can have great confidence that God is never guiding us to make a decision that would involve disobeying his word. I know this seems obvious, but stick around with Christians often enough and you’ll watch people work their way into confusion about this. “I know that she’s not a Christian, but I just feel that God is calling me to marry her. Maybe that’s how he wants her to become a Christian!” “I have this strong sense that I should take this job at the front desk of an abortion clinic.” God will never lead you to contradict his word.
* Second, it’s important to see how obedience in clear things grows us in wisdom to understand how to follow God in unclear areas as well. Listen to Job 28:28, “Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to turn away from evil is understanding.” Or Romans 12:2, “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.” Notice that connection between obedience and wisdom. As we are transformed instead of being conformed, we’ll be able to better discern God’s will. Quite often, it’s not easy to know which path is the path of obedience. How do I talk with my coworker about his upcoming marriage to another man? How do I care for my aging parents and also fulfill my covenant responsibilities to this church? What do we need in order to discern what obedience looks like? We need wisdom. How do we get wisdom? By obeying. Obey God in the places you can see clearly, and he will give you wisdom to discern obedience in places that right now are less clear. Conversely, if you are rejecting obedience in places you can see, perhaps you shouldn’t be so surprised that God’s will seems so fuzzy and unclear.

1. **His Will is That We Be Holy**

1 Thessalonians 4:3, “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…”

*Is Paul giving us an example of God’s will of decree or his will of command?*

[answer: both. God commands us to be sanctified, which overlaps with his will that we obey. But he also decrees that if we really are in Christ, we will be sanctified. Bring up Philippians 2:12-13, “Therefore my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling [will of command], for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure” [will of decree].]

If you really are a Christian, you *will* be made holy. That work will not finish in this life, but it will absolutely make progress in this life. If you see no fruit of holiness in your life, you should have good cause to question whether you really are in the faith (2 Cor. 13:5).

Now, why would God reveal his will about something relatively trivial like becoming holy while not revealing his will about really important things like who you should marry, where you should retire, or what job you should pursue?

Perhaps because we’ve done a poor job of assessing what decisions really are important. Going back to Kevin DeYoung again, here’s how he puts it:

*The most important issues for God are moral purity, theological fidelity, compassion, joy, our witness, faithfulness, hospitality, love, worship, and faith. These are His big concerns. The problem is that we tend to focus most of our attention on everything else. We obsess over the things God has not mentioned and may never mention, while, by contrast, we spend little time on all the things God has already revealed to us in the Bible.[[3]](#footnote-3)*

Remember: God is most glorified as our work shows off his work. What you do for work may not be nearly as important in his assessment as how you do it. Who you marry may not be nearly as important as how you live out that marriage. Where you retire may not be nearly as important to him as how you steward your retirement. If we aligned our mental energy to the will of God that he’s revealed, we might find ourselves concerned about radically different things.

Now, pair that thought with Romans 8:28 and our eyes are really opened as to what’s important in this life.

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.

God is working for the good of those who love him *in all things*. But, I’ve gotta be honest with you. There have been times in my own life where I am facing some trial of some sort, and I can’t for the life of me figure out how the trial is being used for my good. The problem is my conception of good doesn’t match God’s conception of good. I equate ‘good’ with comfort, ease, and pleasure. But if we take a closer look at this passage we see what Paul means when he says that God works all things for the good of those who love him, we find that God equates ‘our good’ with being conformed to the likeness of Jesus. That’s a paradigm shifting understanding of what ‘good’ means isn’t it?! Jesus, after all, was a man of sorrows, and so our becoming like him means our becoming acquainted with grief and suffering, yet remaining obedient to the end.

So often, when we talk about not wanting to miss God’s will for our lives we have in mind a life free from pain and discomfort, a life in which if we make the right choice every time then we will be in God’s will, and our lives will go along smoothly. But, not only is that a lie, it completely misses the truly good thing God has in mind for us.

When we face trials of every kind we need not fear that we are being punished for missing God’s will for our lives through some mistake of our own. No, if God is sovereign, and his purposes cannot be thwarted, then he can use even our bad decisions to bring about his purposes to make us like Christ. Remember, what is God’s will for you? 1 Thes. 4:3, that you may be sanctified. That you may be holy.

*[If time: Do any of you have any examples to offer in your own life of how God has worked through trials or possibly a bad decision on your part to bring about your good?]*

1. **His Will is That Christ be Exalted**

Let’s read Ephesians 1:5-10.

In love, he predestined us to be adopted as sons through Jesus Christ according to his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the beloved. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.

We see God’s will show up first in this passage as our adoption as sons and daughters, and most ultimately, in God’s great work of uniting all things in Christ, both in heaven and on earth.

What is God’s will? For Christ to be exalted. “Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knew should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:9-11).

What implications does that have for your decision? Namely, that we line up with God’s will! This is ultimately what God is about. He will make a name for himself, for his son. And so as we think through Christian decision-making, we also want to align every decision we make with God’s great, unstoppable purposes to bring all things, in heaven and on earth, together under one name: Jesus Christ.

**IV. How to do God’s will**

So, some of you, if you’re like me, might be thinking, “You know John, all this doctrine and stuff is good, and I’m glad that I’ve learned it, but what am I supposed to do with this? I mean, since God is doing everything and his plans can’t be thwarted, should I just sit back and let him do all the work?” Well…not exactly. Though there’s no specific secret will of God for your life that you need to find, there is a way for you to actually do God’s will. So, if you’re following along on your handout we’re in our final section: ‘How to do God’s will’… and to learn how to do God’s will, we’re going to take a look at one important passage to see what it has to say about doing the will of God.

Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they?[[4]](#footnote-4)

We can’t miss what Jesus says here about worry and anxiety, look back at the passage, note how in verse 30 he attributes worry and anxiety to a lack of faith. “O you of little faith.” For Jesus, worry is a spiritual issue that must be fought with faith. We need to fight to believe that whatever troubles come at us today that God gives grace and mercy for us to face them. This is the same God who parted seas, brought manna from heaven, made water come from a rock, and sent his Son into the world to die for our sins. He will not fail you in your time of need. He will give you everything you need to live. God’s way is not to show us the future, but instead to cause us to come to him each and every day, displaying our need for him and our dependence upon him.

So how do we do God’s will? We trust him for the future. And by faith, we use the wisdom he’s given us to make the best decisions we can. But what guides us as we make those decisions? Take a look at verse 33.

What’s it say? “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness…”

Knowing the will of God has nothing to do with trying to listen for the voice of God, or to interpret signs or dreams or subjective feelings. It’s about loving God, cherishing his commands, and pursuing holiness with every ounce of energy you have. We don’t find the will of God by asking “What is God’s will for my life?” or “How can I know God’s plan for my life?” Instead, we find the will of God by asking, “Am I seeking first his kingdom and his righteousness?” That is God’s will for your life.

**V. Conclusion**

As we close I wanted to read a quote from Kevin DeYoung’s book on guidance that I think sums up well what we’ve been thinking about today. He says,

Simply put, God’s will is your growth in Christlikeness. God promises to work all things together for our good that we might be conformed to the image of his Son. And the degree to which this sounds like a lame promise is the degree to which we prefer the stones and scorpions of this world to the true bread from heaven. God never assures us of health, success, or ease. But He promises us something even better: He promises to make us loving, pure and humble like Christ. In short, God’s will is that you and I get happy and holy in Jesus…The only chains God wants us to wear are the chains of righteousness—not the chains of hopeless subjectivism, not the shackles of risk-free living, not the fetters of horoscope decision making—just the chains befitting a bond servant of Christ Jesus. Die to self. Live for Christ. And then do what you want and go where you want, for God’s glory.

[Pray]

1. Haddon Robinson, as quoted in *Just Do Something,* page 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Gerald Sittser, *The Will of God as a Way of Life: Finding and Following the Will of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 17. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Just Do Something* pages 42-43. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Matthew 6:25-26 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)