

Wisdom in Discerning God's Will

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[0 : 00] Well, friends, one of the great joys of being a parent is to see our children grow in wisdom. Correct, parents? Nodding? Yep. We all know that when children are young, we make all their decisions for them, don't we?

At least we try. So like what they eat, what they wear, where they go each day. But as they grow up, our aim as parents is to train them to decide for themselves and hopefully to do it with the wisdom that we've taught them.

It would be odd, wouldn't it, if you're still deciding what they wear to uni each day? Although I have read that there are parents that are turning up to university orientation days and to the lectures. Is that right or is that wrong? Someone in the morning said, yes, actually, she's seen parents doing that. They're still helicopter parenting their children. Well, you know, I think God works not in the same way as these helicopter parents, but works in the same way as I described earlier with us as well when it comes to doing His will.

He wants us to grow in wisdom, to make godly and wise choices for ourselves instead of always telling us what to do. Now, of course, God would want us to talk to Him and pray, but He also wants us to think His thoughts after Him.

[1 : 28] So yes, in the Bible there are specific instructions to tell us what to do and not to do. And He gives us His character displayed in His Son so that we can model after Him.

But He has also given us His wisdom to grow us in wisdom so that we make good choices by ourselves, as it were. It's such a joy for me as a parent when I see my children do that.

And Emma and Lauren, they're here. I have to say that they are doing it more and more. And the great joy is seeing them do the right thing, not because I tell them to do it, but because they themselves know that it's the right thing to do.

And you see, I don't want them to keep running to me all the time and asking me, what should I do, what should I do? Rather, as they grow, I would like them to form their own convictions and be able to do the right things by themselves, on their own.

And that's the same way with God as well. As we grow in faith and maturity and prayerfully grow in the knowledge of His Word, He allows us to make those choices in our lives.

[2 : 40] I don't think God is a helicopter God. And so my emphasis today as we finish up this series is that when it comes to discerning God's will in our lives, wisdom is the key.

Wisdom is the thing that God gives to us to help us make choices in life. And what better way to understand this than to look into Proverbs?

We don't have time to look at the whole of Proverbs, but in the first nine chapters of Proverbs, as many of you know, it is actually different from the rest of the book in that it does not have these one-line pithy sayings, so much as lay the groundwork for wisdom.

In these chapters, we see wisdom and folly portrayed as two women. And here in chapter 4, we read of wisdom, lady wisdom, and we are exhorted to pursue her.

But let me begin in verses 1 to 4, where my first point is that wisdom is gained or found, as the outline says, with one generation passing it down to another. Listen, my sons, to a father's instruction.

[3 : 48] Pay attention and gain understanding. I give you sound learning, so do not forsake my teaching. For I too was a son to my father, still tender and cherished by my mother. Then he taught me and he said to me, take hold of my words with all your heart.

Keep my commands and you will live. Here you see a man telling his son that he too was being taught by his father and now he's doing the same to his son. And so one of the responsibilities of a parent, and one of the key responsibilities, I think, is to pass on wisdom to a child.

And conversely, it's the job of the child to learn willingly, eagerly, intently. And there's no surprise here because all cultures do that. And that's because wisdom isn't just about passing on knowledge or a set of moral do's and don'ts.

Rather, wisdom is the ability to exercise judgment, to understand human behavior, to know what to do in any given situation.

And this requires experience, which normally only comes with age. And so a young person may have a lot of head knowledge. But it's only with the help of an older person who has seen many of these things in life that they are able to grow in wisdom and learn how to do the right thing at the right time, to apply that knowledge correctly.

[5 : 11] And that's commonly the role of the parent. Hence here, a father speaks to his son who asks him to listen, to pay attention, to learn from his commands. Now for the Christian and for Jews, wisdom also has an added dimension.

And that is, the wisdom that is passed down aren't just cultural values or tribal values. Rather, they are universal. They come from God. And since God has revealed himself in his word, wisdom for the Christian is grounded in God's word and requires a relationship with God himself.

So again, in Proverbs 3, verse 5 and 6, which I've got on the slide, it reads, Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways, submit to him and he will make your path straight.

Likewise, Proverbs 9, verse 10, The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding. And so unlike other religions, the Christian faith teaches that wisdom begins with having a relationship with God.

And that makes sense because God is the creator. He's the one that understands the world and understands us deeply and fully. And so for the four of you who have been baptized today, and for all of us, those of us who have a firm faith in Jesus, we have the right foundation, that relationship with God through Christ, to acquire wisdom.

[6 : 46] But in addition to God's word, God also provides his children with other people, older, wiser Christians, who can help us to learn and apply God's word and so do his will.

So that's my first point. The second one that comes from the passage as well is that the passage highlights just how precious this wisdom is. So in verse 5, get wisdom, get understanding, do not forget my words or turn away from them.

Do not forsake wisdom and she will protect you, love her, and she will watch over you. The beginning of wisdom is this, get wisdom. Though it costs all you have, get understanding, cherish her and she will exalt you, embrace her and she will honor you, she will give you a garland to grace your head and present you with a glorious crown.

So here we meet lady wisdom who is portrayed in contrast to folly, which in other chapters is like a prostitute. And in life, we have to choose lady wisdom or prostitute folly.

And we see this play out in the world, don't we? That many people, perhaps the ones that we see are the ones that are rich and famous, they are seduced by folly, aren't they? And they end up squandering their lives.

[8 : 04] Whatever riches they have, whatever achievements they've made, these all come to nothing because they are seduced by folly. They end up deeply unhappy, going from one bad relationship to another and addicted to all sorts of things.

And that's the thing with folly, it's seductive. It's often the easier road. She's calling out on the highway, flashing indecently probably, come here, come here, come and get what you want. By contrast, wisdom is harder to find. She's demanding. She has high standards. And here in these verses, we're exhorted to pursue her at any cost because the rewards are priceless.

Actually, it's the difference between life and death. If you find and cherish her, it says, she'll protect you and watch over you. She'll exalt and honor you and crown you with glory.

It's a wonderful picture, isn't it? And for me personally, I find that God's wisdom gives me peace and comfort. Not the superficial sense of creature comforts, but that deep sense of comfort that knows that God is in control and that this life that I'm living is not out of God's hands.

[9 : 21] It's where He wants me to be. An assurance that I can draw on even when times are tough. So pursue wisdom.

Get wisdom, even if it costs you everything. Well, thirdly now then, we want to look at how this wisdom works in practice. And this is probably what you've, those of you who have been coming for

the last three weeks, this is probably where you've, what you've been waiting for all this time. And that is to work out how does this wisdom work day to day as we make decisions in life? How do we discern God's will? Well, I just want to say three things under this and we'll flip to the Corinthians passage in a while as an illustration.

And the first thing I think is to really differentiate, I think that's helpful, to differentiate between knowing and discerning God's will. You see, there are a lot of things that there are some things that we know God's will for sure.

And we know it because it's revealed to us in His word. So we've seen over the last two weeks, haven't we, that God's big picture will that He will bring all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

[10:36] And that's what's been happening with people being baptized today. That's God's will. We also saw that it was His will to conform us to His Son, to be like Jesus. So every time we're becoming like that, that's God's will as well.

And we also know that He's given us moral laws so that we know what's right and wrong. And whenever we do what's right, that's doing God's will as well. But then there are a lot of other situations where God's sovereign will, if you like, things that are happening in this world, is mysterious to us in the sense that we normally don't see what He's doing and it's not revealed to us in advance until it's happened.

So even the cross, the fact of Jesus dying on the cross for us, that was not actually revealed in full until it's happened. And then we look back and we go, ah, that was God's will.

It was foreshadowed in the Old Testament, but it was not spelt out in full. Same with a lot of the incidents in Acts. It happens and then Luke, as he writes, looking back, he realizes that God was doing these things, that that was God's will.

And I think for us, with our individual lives, a lot of the times, that's how God works. That we actually don't know what God's will is, even as we're making the choices.

[11:59] In the sense that we don't know it with certainty, as we are being given one or two choices and they both seem right. God doesn't normally tell us that this is my will and this is not my will before we make those choices.

Instead, as I said before, He gives us the wisdom to try and make those decisions. And so yes, we should be prayerful, we should be studying God's word to know what His mind might be, and perhaps talking to people to gain wisdom and thinking it through carefully.

But at the end of the day, when we finally make a choice and we step forward in faith, we need to be careful at that point even to declare that I am certain that this is God's will for me, in the sense as if this choice is what God wanted you to do as opposed to that other choice.

Even when we feel strongly about that, we need to be very careful in saying that is what God wants me to do. Some of you might be thinking, oh, but actually there are a lot of examples in the Bible or some examples in the Bible that seem to speak like that.

Well, I don't have time to deal with it tonight, but in many of the cases if we look at them carefully, they are not actually to be treated as norms. And there are probably particular circumstances why that has happened.

[13:15] But it's not very different to how we are as parents, are we? When we want our children to grow up, we want them to exercise wisdom for themselves, don't we? And that's, I think, the same way God is treating us.

Yes, there are times where the right choices are clear, but then there are other times where there may be a number of options, some better than others, but perhaps equally acceptable, some of them.

And that's when God wants us to use wisdom to make those choices. Now, let me show you a graphic which is on the back of your handout, but also on the slide to just elaborate on this a bit more because some of you might be sort of wondering where I'm coming from with this.

There is a traditional view, isn't there, that God's will, among Christians, that God's will, people think that God's will looks a bit like this. So the big shaded area is God's will for the universe.

That's everything that happens in history within God's sovereignty. And then we find our will or God's will for our lives as this bullseye that we need to keep hitting every time we make a choice.

[14:22] Every time there's a decision to make, we need to hit this bullseye, otherwise we fall outside of God's will. Well, I think if you read the Bible, I'm not sure that the Bible actually says that that's how it works.

Instead, as we understand, perhaps reading Proverbs, but other parts of the Bible, we understand that what God is doing is giving us wisdom, which is more like the second diagram, which is also on your handout.

And that is, God's will is a bit more like an area, a target, within which we are faced with choices that we have some freedom within to make. And provided we're not disobeying God and His Word, provided we're aligning our lives with His will in the universe, then God actually allows us to make those choices with some freedom within it.

So I want to use, for example, marriage as an example. I'm sure many of you might have asked this question, is it God's will for me to marry or not? And if it is, who?

And many people think we have to find the one, that somehow in the world out there, there's this one person that God has set aside for me, and I need to go and find that person because that's God's will for me.

[15:38] Well, I think that's not the right way to be thinking about it. Provided we're not making poor choices, of course, that would take us away from the faith, and even then, when we do that, He will allow us to live by those consequences.

But if that's not the case, then I think He's given us the wisdom to make those choices, to choose the person even, and then not to agonize over whether we've chosen the right person or not for the rest of our lives.

Because it's not like God had that specific person in mind for us. Now, if you're not convinced, turn with me now to 1 Corinthians 7. It's page 1147.

Many people use this text as though it's like a checklist that they need to run through in order to work out.

But actually, I think this is a textbook case of how to exercise God's wisdom. Paul is actually giving advice. So look with me at verse 25.

[16:41] He says, page 1147, Now, about virgins, I have no command from the Lord. He's saying, I'm not giving you a specific instruction here, but I give a judgment as one who, by the Lord's mercy, is trustworthy.

So what Paul is saying is that when it comes to marriage, these are not commands, but rather, he's giving advice as one who has God's wisdom, who has experience in these things, and has been counted trustworthy.

So yes, listen to him because he has good advice, but these are not commands. And then he goes on to explain his reasons. First, he shares his understanding of the world and the present situation. Verse 26, Because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for a man to remain as he is.

That is, if you're single, to avoid marriage because the world is troubled. But then he also goes on to say, if you're married, then, you know, stay married. Don't make a big deal about it for the same reason.

Again, he's not giving you instructions, but he's saying, this is my advice. Look at what the world is doing. Then he shares his wisdom on relationships. And here he says, marriage is hard.

[17:49] Verse 28, But those who marry will face many troubles in his life, and I want to spare you this. Verse 33, But a married man is concerned about the affairs of this world, how he can please his wife, and his interests are divided.

So again, he's giving advice. If you want to be married, just know that your attention will be divided. It will be hard work. Marriage is not a bed of roses. You need to understand what marriage is all about.

So he's given some advice about understanding the world. He's given some advice about wisdom, about relationships. And then finally, in verse 36, he gives them wisdom about knowing your own self.

If anyone is worried that he might not be acting honorably towards the virgin he's engaged to, and if his passions are too strong, and he feels he ought to marry, he should do as he wants.

He's not sinning. They should get married. So Paul is bringing factors in here to be weighed up, isn't he? When considering marriage, consider the state of the world, consider the nature of relationships, and in particular, make sure you're self-aware of your own weaknesses and temptations.

[18:55] But does he then give a definitive yes or no for every person? No. In fact, he says in verse 38, So then he who marries the virgin does right, but he who does not marry does better.

Everyone needs to make up their own minds for verse 37. Does it mean we all have to be single because it's better? No. Not if being single makes you prone to sin because of your weakness. But if you think you can keep your passions in check and you desire that better thing, then yes, singleness is a better thing. Go for it. But it's not for me to judge where you're at or for you to judge me.

We all have to assess this on ourselves. Exercise wisdom and understand ourselves. Understand where we're at. Things may change with time. And then if we find ourselves single for whatever reason, devote ourselves to serving the Lord wholeheartedly.

And if we find ourselves married, well, make sure our marriage works that honors God. Do you see what I'm saying? That actually, God's allowing us to make those choices based on wisdom.

[20 : 02] Now, if you want, let me go a bit more. If you think that this whole bullseye idea is still valid to you, let me ask you this question. Here's an audience participation question.

Who here thinks they've never done anything wrong in their life? Put up your hands if you think that. Giving you time to think just in case.

No one, right? No one. I'm glad. Because the Bible says there should be no one. Romans 3, 23, all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. So, no one here is perfect, right?

You agree? Well, if that's the case, then I'm sorry to say you've all missed the bullseye, haven't you? If you've done one thing wrong in life, you've missed that bullseye. You have not kept God's will perfectly. So, where does that leave us if we think this bullseye thing works?

Are we on to God's second choice now? Second best plan? Or third best plan? Or fourth best plan? But it doesn't work like that, does it? If you read the Bible, God is a God of grace. We've had the testimonies tonight to say so.

[21 : 04] God is in the business of giving us second chances and third and fourth and fifth chances. That's what repentance is all about. That's what redemption is all about. For those of us who have been studying Deuteronomy at Young Adults on Wednesday night, we've seen it time and time again with Israel, isn't it?

That God is a God of second chances. And so, God's will for us can't be that bullseye, can it? But rather, it's like a target area. Sometimes we don't end up obeying God's will because we sin, but provided we're repentant and we remain in Christ, then we remain in God's will.

And that's the same as well for options that we have. However we choose, provided we remain in Christ, then we are in God's will. Last week, we saw in Romans chapter 8, verse 28, the verse which on the slide, we know that God works for the good of those who love Him.

And so, if we love Him, there is in a sense, in one sense, we can't fall outside His will, can we? Even when we disobey Him. And if that's true, then how much more do we not fall outside when we make these choices?

Our disobedience or even our lack of wisdom cannot frustrate God's purpose for us. And so, that's my second point that if we are in Christ, then there's no point agonizing over with Miss God's perfect will for us.

[22 : 29] That bullseye. It's not like we've made a mistake and it's all over because God is more gracious than that. And I say this so that we're not paralyzed by our decision making.

We're not always hanging on to go, oh, what if I choose the wrong career? What if I marry the person that's not compatible for me? It's not helpful to be thinking like that. God has, He has our life in His hands and there's no mistake, as it were, that can frustrate His purpose for us which is ultimately to make us like Jesus.

So, never think, for example, if you're already married, that you've married the wrong person because it wasn't God's choice. No, once you're married, that is God's will for you.

That person is someone God wants you to be faithful to, to make the marriage work. But, of course, the third point that I want to make under this is that we then mustn't be presumptuous.

So, on the one hand, don't be agonizing with that perfect will, but then, on the other hand, not then say, oh, well, if it doesn't matter, then I'll just do whatever I want. I can't fall outside God's purpose. Because the Bible does also talk about falling away, about making every effort to make our calling and election truer.

[23 : 49] And that's the verse that I've got on 2 Peter 1, verse 10. Therefore, my brothers and sisters, make every effort to confirm your calling and election, for if you do these things, you will never stumble.

It's conditional, isn't it? You do these things, you will never stumble. It's not that then we can, our salvation depends on our works, but no, once we've been saved, God wants us to keep obeying His word, because that's what His will is for us.

And you will receive a rich welcome, Pope Peter says, into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. And so my particular encouragement for those of you who are baptized today, and I say to everyone who is baptized, what matters is not how well you start, what's important is how well you finish.

and that means growing in your faith, doing God's word, and growing in wisdom. So we cannot be presumptuous, but yet on the other hand, we don't need to be agonizing about whether we miss God's will or not.

Well friends, there's a lot more I can say, people have written books about it, so the two that I've recommended in my newsletters, the first one is by Philip Jensen, Guidance and the Voice of God. You're more than welcome to borrow these books, by the way, if you like.

[25 : 14] That's quite an easy read, so do grab that if you want to learn more. And then there's this other book that has been sitting on my shelf for the best part of 30 years.

It's called Decision Making and the Will of God. And it's a very precious book to both Elissa and I. In fact, on the inside it has got a yellow tag there that says this is a very precious book to Elissa Chu, smiley face, because it talks about this whole idea of not needing to find the bull's eye.

In fact, what happened was a month or two before I asked Elissa out, I gave her this book to read. My hope was that she wouldn't have to agonize over whether I was the one because there would have been no hope otherwise.

instead, I just had to make her realize that I was an acceptable choice to God. And the rest, they say, is history.

You know, I know and I understand that a lot of Christians have this strong desire, don't they, to want to get that confirmation, that still small voice from God to tell them what to do.

[26 : 29] And that's not a bad desire, but I think sometimes that's not very helpful. So I think instead of praying, Lord, show me exactly what you want me to do, which we can pray, I think sometimes it's better to pray instead, Lord, give me your wisdom so that I might choose well.

Give me your wisdom so that I might choose well. Because that's actually how God wants us to help, wants to help us to discern his will. We may never know for sure as we step out in faith, but as I said last week, that's a good thing, isn't it?

That we walk by faith, but as we use God's wisdom, which he gives us, then it would actually please him as we make choices that align with that wisdom.

Let's pray. Our Father, give us wisdom to choose well. Assure us so that if we remain in Christ, we do not need to be paralyzed by the thought of choosing wrongly.

Help us to know that if we trust in you and seek wisdom, that you will guide us, even if we may have done regrettable things in the past. Thank you that you love us and have us in your purpose because of Jesus' death for us on the cross.

[27 : 45] In his name we pray. Amen.