

I Spy . . . and Other Christian Games

Becoming a Non-Conformist – Part IV

Romans 12:2b

Introduction

If you were to pick up a number of books on the subject of God's will and read them, as I have in recent years, you would discover as many opinions on how to discover the will of God as there are books on the subject. I have read two books in the last week on the subject of finding God's will and they took two entirely different approaches.

Perhaps you have discovered, in your own experience, that when someone talks about how to discover the will of God, they usually come up with some unique or novel approach. It frequently involves some subjective experience or strange testimony of how they found it.

They may tell a story such as, "The phone rang at exactly 10:30 in the morning and it rang three times. It was from one of the companies at which I had applied to work. I had not known whether I should take the job, but this company's address was 1030 and the suite number was 3."

It would certainly be helpful to get a phone call when you were in doubt, right?!

I had a woman come up to me after a church membership GreenHouse class one night, and say, "Hey, Pastor, I had a dream last night and you were dialing a phone number. When I asked who you were calling, you said, 'I'm calling to talk to God.'"

We laughed, and she continued, "I specifically remember seeing the first numbers. They were '862'."

I said, "Listen, when you go to sleep tonight, try to get the rest of the phone number – I need it! Try to have that dream again!"

I will never forget a response I received one day while in college. I knew a young lady who had just gotten engaged. I also knew her fiancée and that they had only known each other for a short time. I was intrigued by their decision to get married. I asked her, "How did you know he was the one?"

She responded, "We were in the mall last week looking at rings for fun. He picked out a diamond ring for me to try on. I said in my heart that if the ring fit, he was the one. And the ring fit!"

I thought, "He deserves someone as deep as you."

What happens if you lose the ring before the wedding, or if it turns your finger green and you have to get another one after the wedding? What happens then?

Many Christians are waiting for a sign or a feeling. They are waiting for a momentous event in life – like walking through the house, slipping on a banana peel, and landing on a map of China – so they can think, "Ah, God wants me to go to China."

Perhaps God is simply telling them to take out the trash.

I find it fascinating that the apostle Paul never tells the believer to find the will of God. He expects the believer to *do* the will of God.

However, Paul also makes it clear that the will of God is not some moment of revelation. It happens to be a lifestyle of renewal where the believer is being

transformed in his thinking patterns after the things of God's word. That is what we have been learning in Romans, chapter 12.

The Declared Will of God

The Bible does not talk about discovering the will of God – it talks about the declared will of God. In other words, the Bible talks about that which God has already declared to be His will.

Surrender to the Holy Spirit's control

I appreciated one author who talked about what we know the Bible says is the will of God. He referred to Ephesians, chapter 5, verses 15 through 17, which commands the Christian,

Therefore, be careful how you walk, not as unwise men, but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil. So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

So, what is the will of the Lord? The rest of that chapter spells it out. Continue to verse 18.

And do not get drunk with wine, . . . but be filled with the Spirit,

In other words, do not allow yourself to be under the influence of wine, but choose to be under the influence of the Spirit of God.

Chapters 5 and 6 of Ephesians continue to tell us what it looks like to be under the influence of the Holy Spirit. Christians are told:

- Wives, be submissive and respectful to your husbands (5:22);
- Husbands, love your wives with sacrificial love (5:25);
- Children, obey your parents (6:1);
- Fathers, guide your children toward the things of the Lord (6:4);
- Servants or employees, work with integrity and diligence (6:5-8);
- Masters or employers, treat them fairly and honestly (6:9).

All of this can happen when you surrender to the dominating control of the Holy Spirit, which happens to be the will of God.

Pursue holy living

We are also told in God's word that it is the will of God to be sexually pure.

Paul wrote, in I Thessalonians, chapter 4, verse 3 (KJV),

For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that you should abstain from fornication;

Fornication is any sexual activity outside the bonds of marriage.

It is absurd for a young person or older person alike, who is living in sexual impurity to say, "God, show me Your will about my career . . . or my college major . . . or any other choice." Such a person is not even doing what this text of Scripture says is the will of God. Why should God disclose some further will?¹

Paul broadens the pursuit of purity by writing at the end of that paragraph,

for God has not called us to unclean living, but holy living. (I Thessalonians 4:7, paraphrased)

So the declared will of God is to surrender to the Holy Spirit's control, to pursue holy living, and thirdly, to obey the laws and ordinances of your country – in so far as they do not require you to violate the law of God (we will deal with that subject more when we get to Romans, chapter 13).

Obey the laws and ordinances of your country

The apostle Peter wrote, in I Peter, chapter 2, verses 13 through 15a (KJV),

Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake; whether it be to the king as supreme, or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of those who do right. For such is the will of God . . .

We are to obey every ordinance of government, as this is God's will.

I wonder how many violated God's will this month as they filled out their income tax forms – an ordinance of the government.

I wonder how many obey the ordinance of the speed limit. I was convicted of this once again this past week. God used a man in a dark blue uniform to serve as His agent of conviction. I was sick!

How can we say, "Lord, I want to follow your will over there," if we will not follow His will over here?

Encounter suffering and tribulation

It is, furthermore, the will of God for the believer to encounter suffering and tribulation.

Peter wrote, in I Peter, chapter 5, verse 10,

After you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who called you to His eternal glory in Christ, will Himself perfect, confirm, strengthen and establish you.

He also wrote, in chapter 4, verse 19, of,

. . . those also who suffer according to the will of God . . .

Paul wrote to the Philippians believers these incredible words, in chapter 1, verse 29,

For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake,

And one cannot easily overlook Paul's passionate prayer, in Philippians, chapter 3, verse 10,

that I many know Him [Christ] and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings . . .

Have a spirit of thanksgiving

It is also the declared will of God to have a spirit of thanksgiving.

Paul wrote in his first letter to the Thessalonians, chapter 5, verse 18,

in everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

If you did your own search for the phrase, "the will of God," you might uncover even more declared truth, but these four alone are sufficient:

- a submission to the Holy Spirit's control;
- a pursuit of holy living;
- an acceptance of suffering;
- a spirit of thanksgiving.

I agree with one author, that if you, as a believer, desire to do these things, then in a situation when you do not know what to do and yet, must decide – do whatever you want! Your desire is to please God and when that is true, God will give you the desire of your heart. So, in other words, do whatever you want!

You might say, "That sounds too open ended; too risky; too liberating. You can't just do what you want. Don't tell my kids you said that!"

Or, "Surely you cannot just do what you want. I thought doing the will of God meant you never got to do what you wanted!"

Or, "In fact, when presented with two options, the one you like the most is not the will of God, right? It's a trick to see if you're willing to mortify the flesh."

No, but God has a way, through pressure and pain, maturing and growing to change you to want what He wants. You can then say with David,

The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. (Psalm 23:1)

In other words, "There is nothing I really want that He hasn't provided, because He happens to be my shepherd."

I have what I want in Him and I will trust Him for what He does not give me.

Finding the Will of God

Now, how do you know that what you want is really God's will? Finding God's will for so many questionable things cannot be that simple, can it?

The apostle Paul has given us some guidelines to help us make sure that our wants equal God's will. That is found in the latter part of Romans, chapter 12, verse 2.

Let us start by looking at verse 1 of chapter 12.

Therefore I urge you, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.

That is an excellent description and declaration of the will of God, by the way.

Give God your body! Give Him your life! Give Him your worship!

In other words, do not ask God to show you His will about some things, if you are not willing to do these things. These are positive things to do!

Paul then tells the believer what not to do, in verse 2a!

And do not be conformed to this world . . .

That is the opposite of God's will. Phillips translated it,

Don't be squeezed into the world's mold.

Do not follow the herd.

Do not ever confuse the will of the majority with the will of God.

Now, here is the positive command, in verse 2b,
. . . but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, . . .

That is a mind that is in the process of being remade with new thinking patterns – not according to the world’s wisdom, but God’s wisdom.

Watch what happens in the rest of that verse,
. . . so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

The word “prove,” from “dokimazo,” means, “to accept as approved after testing”.

It means to determine in the laboratory of life that God’s will is in fact, these three things.

However, I need to give you a warning – to arrive at the conclusion that God’s will is pure and pleasing and perfect does not occur automatically – it requires the previous condition of:

- a life – not conformed to the world;
- a mind – transformed by the word.

These three descriptions of God’s will are actually three adjectives – used as substantives or nouns in the original language of the Greek New Testament. They describe God’s will. I could paraphrase and amplify it for you to enhance the meanings of these substantives to read,

. . . you will know that you have found God’s will for it is that which is good, that which is pleasing, and that which produces spiritual maturity.

He is not talking about going out and trying to discover the perfect will of God, “I hope I find His perfect will!” He is not saying that if you are clever, and faultless, and consistent, you just might discover the acceptable will of God – as if God were hiding it from all but the clever Christians. He is not saying that if you are really extra special, you will find the good will of God.

Paul is actually saying that when you do something or decide something, if it is pure and pleasing to God and it leads to your further development and maturity as a believer, then you have chosen God’s will.

Paul’s words takes the mystery out of it. It is not a game God has created that only a few Christians will ever win.

Maybe you have secretly thought of discovering the will of God through methods that are something like the game of Yahtzee. In other words, close your eyes, roll the dice, and hope it fits with what you need on your scorecard to win. If you are like me, the last time I played it I could never roll the right combination. I could never win that game.

Perhaps you think discovering the will of God is somewhat like the game of Clue. If you are clever at moving your game piece into just the right room and then, uncover just the right clue at the just the right time, you can put the clues together and before it is too late, figure the game out!

How about that game called Twister as your concept of finding God’s will? You have to put one leg over there and one hand over here and your other hand behind your back and your other leg back there – until you collapse from the torture!

Maybe you think finding God’s will is like winning the game of Sorry. Do you remember that game? You make it halfway around the board, and get nailed by someone who gets in your way or stomps on your spot, and you get slammed back to the very beginning where you have to start all over again.

Frankly, I think the average believer who wants to do the right thing, thinks finding the will of God is most like a game that I have played for years. When my children were young, in fact, we played it while I sat on the bathroom counter and they each slid and slapped around in the bathtub, taking their nightly bath. It was the game we called, “I Spy”.

During most of their early years, we lived in a home that had one bathtub, and it was rather small. That should have made playing I Spy a little easier, but not with my kids. Their goal was to stump Dad, so they would pick something that was infinitesimally small. That is a word, by the way, I looked it up. Infinitesimally – small! They were going to beat me.

I would finally give in and say, “Okay, we’ve got to go to hot and cold.”

You know how that works, right?!

So I would look over here, and they would say, “Cold!”

“Is that it?”

“Colder!”

“Is that it?”

“You’re freezing, Daddy.”

So I would look the other way. As I started to pick out items closer to the object, they would say, “You’re getting warmer . . . warmer . . . hot . . . hot . . . steaming . . . burning!”

Then, finally, “That’s it!”

“You mean this little piece of lint on the shower curtain was it?”

“Daddy couldn’t guess it! Daddy couldn’t guess it!”

“Yes, and you can stay in there until the water gets cold.”

The truth is, there is no verse that commands the believer to go out and see if he can spy out the will of God. We are not told to follow the carefully hidden clues or listen for angels to whisper, “You’re getting warmer . . .”. There is no verse that says, “Roll the dice and figure it out.” Good luck!

What Paul is saying in Romans, chapter 12, verses 1 through 2, is that the transformed mind views the will of God as that which is good, acceptable, and perfect.

In whatever believers choose to do, they will be able to hold themselves accountable to the fact that if it is indeed the will of God, it will have these three characteristics that prove God’s will for the believer. It will be good, acceptable, and perfect.

Characteristics of the Will of God

Let us take a closer look at the three characteristics of the will of God.

The will of God is good

Paul writes in the latter part of Romans, chapter 12, verse 2,

. . . the will of God is, that which is good . . .

To call the will of God good, and choose to follow God’s will as something considered good will require a divine perspective. That is because sometimes the will of God seems anything but good. It demands the perspective of faith.

I like the way Fred Whitman said it, “When we can’t figure it out, we faith it out!”ⁱⁱ

Explain God’s will to Joseph, who was a convicted sex offender. His crime was attempted rape. How that verdict must have caused him to shudder with disbelief every time he was reminded of it. He was anything but a sexual offender; in fact, he was in prison because he refused to offend God in

regards to sexual promiscuity – it landed him in prison.

Years later, through the providence of God, Joseph ultimately rose through the political ranks within the empire of Egypt to eventually serve as Prime Minister. His wisdom saved the empire from famine. Those in the regions beyond Egypt also came for food. And who would stand before him, but his own brothers, who earlier had sold him as a slave to get rid of him. That began what we would conclude to be, a very bad journey to nowhere.

When Joseph eventually revealed his identity to his brothers, they expected the worst – they expected revenge. It never came.

Instead, Joseph moved Daddy Jacob to Egypt, along with the entire family. Joseph was allowed to give them fertile land where the family would multiply over the centuries from seventy to several million.

Then, however, in chapter 50 of Genesis, we are told that Jacob died. Once again, Joseph’s brothers expected the hammer to fall, thinking, “Now, surely he’ll cut our throats.”

They came and fell at Joseph’s feet – a fulfillment, by the way, of his boyhood dream – and said, in verse 17,

. . . please forgive . . . your brothers, . . . for [we] did you wrong. . . .

Joseph then delivers what divine perspective had produced in him, in verses 19 and 20.

. . . Do not be afraid, for am I in God’s place?

He is literally saying, “Am I not in God’s will?”

. . . you meant evil against me, but God meant it for . . .

What?

. . . good . . .

The will of God is good! That, ladies and gentlemen, requires a divine perspective.

That is why Paul says, in effect, that the ability to call God’s will “good” is based upon the condition of having your mind renewed – radically altered – by the word of God.

The will of God is acceptable

Paul gives a second description in Romans, chapter 12, verse 2b,

... the will of God is, that which is ... acceptable ...

This characteristic demands divine goals.

The word “acceptable” can be translated “well-pleasing”. So, what is well-pleasing to God becomes the goal of the believer.

If it is not acceptable to God, it is not acceptable to the believer, for the transformed believer does not want anything that does not please the Lord.

I read recently, of one believer who takes inventory every thirty minutes to make sure that he is living, thinking, doing, saying, planning, dreaming, working in a way that would not be displeasing to God. He has built into his Day Timer the question, “Right now, for the last thirty minutes, have I been pleasing to God?”

That man will never have to wonder, “Have I missed the will of God?” He is fulfilling it! For his highest goal in life is the pleasure of God.

The will of God is perfect

Paul adds one more characteristic to his list in Romans, chapter 12, verse 2b,

... the will of God is, that which is ... perfect.

Calling:

- the will of God “good” will require a divine perspective,
- the will of God “well-pleasing” will require a divine goal,
- the will of God “perfect” will require divine wisdom.

You need to understand that there are several words translated “perfect” in the Bible.

One is the word “akribos,” from which we get our word “accurate”. Another word refers to something well fitted to a specific end, like a perfect solution to a puzzle. However, the word in this verse in Romans is different. It is the word “teleios,” which has the thought of something that is complete and mature.ⁱⁱⁱ

It is the same word found in James, chapter 1, that comes as a result of testing and proving and growing. James writes, in verses 2 through 4,

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have it's perfect result, so

that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.

Spiritual perfection; that is, maturity, comes from spiritual testing.

We need divine wisdom to consider that the will of God.

Surely the will of God is found and lived when life is smooth.

Can you imagine asking James, “Say, James, how do you know if you’re in the will of God?” And then, hear James answer, “Because I’m being tested!”

That takes wisdom – divine wisdom!

There is another wisdom available, as you may know. James, chapter 3, talks about the wisdom of the world! Listen as he describes it, in verses 15 and 16,

This wisdom is not that which comes down from above [from heaven], but it is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing.

That is the wisdom of the world.

The wisdom of the world says:

- You have a right to any desire.
- You have a right to use power to get you own way.
- You have a right to use people to meet your agenda and goals.
- You have a right to accumulate wealth for your own acquisitions.
- You have a right to use your talents and abilities for self satisfaction.
- You have a right to ignore the truth of God’s word and even God Himself.

This is the wisdom of the majority! You are surrounded by a multitude of counselors, and guess what? They are all wrong! There is supposed to be safety in a multitude of counselors, but may I warn you, if your multitude of counselors is following after the wisdom of the world, they will not provide safety, they will lead you to disaster.

Never confuse the wisdom of the majority with the wisdom of God.

This past weekend I talked to one of my sons, who is almost finished with his freshman year of college. He is struggling with a particular decision that he is in the midst of making. He called to talk to

my wife and I about it, and in the course of describing his last two weeks of agony, he said, “You know, Dad, I realized I was going to God for answers, but what I needed to do was go to God for wisdom instead.”

I said, “Man, that is a tremendous thought.”

We do not pursue God for answers; we pursue God for wisdom.

I said it again, “Wow, son, that is really a great insight! May I use it in my sermon?”

He said, “Are you going to pay me for it?”

Actually, I told him I owed him for it.

We do not pursue God for answers; we pursue God for wisdom.

That is true. In fact, the very next verse in James, chapter 1, paraphrased, says,

. . . if any of you lack this kind of wisdom, ask God and don't hold back – and God will give you wisdom generously; that is, He won't hold back either.

We need a divine perspective, we need divine goals, and we desperately need divine wisdom.

Why? Because life is not a game. And neither is the will of God.

Application

Let me give two thoughts in closing, about the will of God.

The will of God is not a matter of revelation, it is a matter of resignation

1. The will of God is not a matter of revelation, it is a matter of resignation.

It is not walking through life waiting for that big flash in the sky, or in our spirit of revelation – here it is!

No, it is often the difficulty and even the drudgery of walking through life surrendered to the daily discipline of aligning our thoughts and our actions to the standard of God's word.

It is not revelation, but reformation; relationship.

I love the way Martin Luther, the converted monk of many centuries ago, put it when he wrote,

This life is not godliness, but the process of becoming godly. It is not health, but eventually getting well; not being, but becoming. And this life is not a place of rest,

but exercise. We are not now what we shall be, but we are on the way.^{iv}

The will of God is not found in a place, it is found in a Person

2. The will of God is not found in a place, it is found in a Person.

The will of God is not like playing the game of Clue, it is passionately pursuing the Person of Jesus Christ.

The will of God is not a game of I Spy. The angels are not in the clouds shouting, if you are clever enough to hear them, “You're cold . . . oh you're freezing . . . you're getting warmer . . . warmer . . .”.

If there is a children's game that fits this pursuit, it is more like Follow the Leader, or a slightly adapted version that would be played like this: “Father, May I?”

Ultimately, the will of God is the good path; the acceptable action; the perfect choice.

It is not a flash of revelation, but a life of resignation.

It is not a longing for some place, but a longing for Someone.

I remember hearing the story years ago, of two young men who were both talented singers. One was a tenor and the other was a deep baritone. Both were believers and were working on a radio show together, singing Christian music. It was not long before their talents were discovered by the secular world and both young men were offered lucrative contracts. One of the men signed the contract and turned his back on the investment of his talent for the glory of God, while the other young man did not sign and said he wanted to use his voice to sing about his Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

The man who chose Babylon, I have never even heard of. However, the man who chose to sing for Christ, has sung before millions of people, the world over. His name is George Beverly Shea, the now elderly singer who has traveled for over sixty years with Billy Graham.

It is not ironic that George Beverly Shea wrote the music to a hymn that became just as famous. It is entitled, “I'd Rather Have Jesus”; and I believe you could say it summed up the goal of his life and a decision he made many years ago – to pursue that which is good, acceptable, and perfect.

To use other words – to pursue that which is pure for God, that which is pleasing to God, and that which produces spiritual maturity and receives wisdom from God.

Sing,

I'd rather have Jesus than silver or gold;

I'd rather be His than have riches untold;

I'd rather have Jesus than houses or lands;

I'd rather be led by His nail-pierced hand.

*I'd rather have Jesus than men's applause;
I'd rather be faithful to His dear cause;
I'd rather have Jesus than world-wide fame;
I'd rather be true to His holy name.*

*Than to be the king of a vast domain
Or be held in sin's dread sway;
I'd rather have Jesus than anything
This world affords today.^v*

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 4/17/2005 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ John MacArthur, Found: God's Will (Victor Books, 1973), p. 32.

ⁱⁱ Harold Sala, Profiles in Faith (Barbour Books, 2003), p. 63.

ⁱⁱⁱ James Montgomery Boice, Romans: Volume 4 (Baker Books, 1995), p. 1559.

^{iv} <http://www.pastors.com>

^v Miller, Rhea F. and Shea, George Beverly, "I'd Rather Have Jesus," (1922, 1950).