

A Life According to Wisdom **Ephesians 5:15-17**

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We continue this week with our series on knowing God's will for your life. Let's review what we have seen so far. We examined our foundational verse, Romans 12:2 – *Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will.* We saw that knowing God's will begins with renewing your mind. How do we do that? By saturating it with God's Word. God's Word is His will, so as our thinking and values are shaped by God's Word, our minds are renewed to His will. We are not taught to make decisions based upon a perceived supernatural sign or testing God with a fleece or feelings that I have in the moment.

We then took a look at the two aspects of God's will. His hidden will, which is His eternal purpose ordaining everything that happens in history and in our lives, and His revealed will which are the moral parameters for our lives and principles that are to guide our lives. God doesn't expect us to anticipate what His hidden will is. Rather, we fulfill His hidden will as we make decisions guided by His revealed will.

"Love God and do as you please." (Augustine) This approach to knowing God's will says that as we truly love God and hold His priorities as supreme in our lives, our desires are changed so that what we want is what God wants in our life, which means that the decisions we make please Him and please us. Psalm 37:4 says, *Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desire of your heart.* As I delight in Him, He changes my desires. God is freed to give me the desires of my heart because the desires of my heart have become the priorities that God has for my life. It won't work if you just like God and then do as you please. Or have a burst of interest in God because of a major decision. People get real spiritual when big decisions are looming. That's not it at all. This is a lifestyle of love for God which, over time, produces a direction and purpose in life which is Godward and results in decisions that are God-honoring. We could stop right here and say, *We've got it covered. It's Mother's Day. Let's talk about Mom now.* However, we haven't dealt with the essential key.

A few years ago a movie came out called, *What About Bob?* A successful psychologist, Dr. Marvin, is assigned a patient by the name of Bob. Bob is psychotic. Bob is unable to make any decisions on his own and becomes dependent on Dr. Marvin to tell him what to do. Dr. Marvin tries to get away from Bob, but Bob NEEDS Dr. Marvin. Dr. Marvin doesn't give his home number out, but Bob finds it and starts calling all day long. Dr. Marvin goes on a secret vacation with his family, but Bob finds out and shows up to torment him. Dr. Marvin's family falls in love with him. Dr. Marvin hates him. Bob wins in the end, joining Dr. Marvin's family for good by marrying Dr. Marvin's sister.

The Church is filled with a lot of Bobs. People who are unable to live life by principle. They're always depending on a direct word from heaven for everything. This is not how God wants us to live. This doesn't honor Him anymore than an adult still needing parental direction in everything honors those parents. Mothers are honored when their children make decisions on their own consistent with how they were raised, and God is honored when we make decisions because our hearts have to come to want what God wants in our lives. This is life according to wisdom.

Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise, but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is. (Ephesians 5:15-17)

The King James Version says, *See then that you walk circumspectly*. The NIV goes with *careful*. The Greek word means *exactness; thorough investigation*. Live your life; walk your path with great care. He clarifies what that care is like. Not as *unwise*. That is the Greek word *sophos* meaning wisdom, only it has the negating *a* in front, meaning *unwise or foolish*. Don’t live foolishly. Rather, live wisely.

What does that look like? Look at verse 16, *Make the most of every opportunity*. Wisdom is the ability to make the most of the opportunities that are presented to us. Not every non-moral, within-the-realm-of-God’s-revealed-will opportunity is as beneficial or expedient as the other. Wisdom sifts through the options available and is able to discern from them what is best.

While I have taught that in non-moral decisions which fall in the stream of God’s revealed will we have freedom to choose, I am not discounting the fact that God expects us to live as wisely as possible and to make the most of our lives. The days are evil and they are short. We only live once. The verse goes on, therefore, *don’t be stupid, learn what the Lord wants you to do*. “Love God and do as you please” assumes that the individual loving God realizes that God does everything according to His wisdom, and so should we.

Brothers and sisters, wisdom is the key. This is the “testing and approving” of Romans 12. This is the means to the knowledge of His will in Colossians 1, through *spiritual wisdom and understanding*. This is what Solomon meant when he wrote, “how much better to get wisdom than gold” (Proverbs 16:16). While we are not to live our lives according to fleece and peace, but we are to live our lives according to wisdom. My goal this morning is to impress the need for wisdom upon our hearts and to give practical helps on how to attain it.

*And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, **so that you may be able to discern what is best** and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ..* (Philippians 1:9-10, emphasis added) So that you may *discern*. This means to *approve, evaluate; to see what is of highest quality*. It is the same word used in Romans 12:2 – *approve*.

This word was used of evaluating pottery in that time. Pottery came in various sizes, but what made some pottery more valuable was how thin it was. This made it more delicate, but also valuable. They had crooks in their day who would take thin pottery that had broken or cracked and hide the defects. The smart shopper would hold up the pottery to the sun. The thin cracks could be seen and its true value determined. They could discern what was best. That is wisdom – to take the pottery of my life and hold it up to the Light. To see through the cheap and superficial and be able to identify what is best.

That is the challenge. Satan knows that even the most immature Christian can see the blatantly evil. He will rarely tempt us with the opportunity for outright evil. He is much more subtle. He brings opportunities into our path that are superficially good, desirable in the moment, maybe wise according to the world’s wisdom. Good things. Thousands of good things all intended to keep us from what is best.

So how do we come to make wise decisions in life? How do we find what is best? How do we live according to wisdom?

A Life According to Wisdom

1. Have the right goal – To please/glorify/fear the Lord

We have said this already, but if you don't begin with this as the goal, you can rationalize nearly anything as being okay with God. Proverbs actually turns it slightly different by saying, *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline.* (Proverbs 1:7)

The fear of the Lord motivates us to seek His pleasure as much as our love for Him. Both keep the Christian pursuing the right goal. Proverbs continues, *Do not forsake wisdom, and she will protect you; love her, and she will watch over you. Wisdom is supreme; therefore get wisdom. Though it cost all you have, get understanding.* (Proverbs 4:6-7) Why is wisdom better than riches? Because a life according to wisdom is more pleasing to God and brings with it the rewards of wisdom. She protects us. She watches over us. Folly leaves us to rot in consequences. So we must have the right goal. Ask yourself, *What would maximize God's pleasure in this decision?* With that in place, now what?

2. Does God's Word give any guidance on the matter?

Where God has clearly stated His will, we can rest in the sure confidence of God's will. No question. However, God has made His will known to us in many general categories that can be applied. These include:

- **Spiritual fruits to display**
Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self control.
- **Virtues to strive for**
Faith, goodness, knowledge, self-control, perseverance, godliness, kindness, love.

There are many other desires that we know God has for us like loving our enemies, forgiving our brothers, witnessing for Christ, loving our wives, getting presents for Mom on Mother's Day... So we have to ask, *which options in this decision will help me fulfill specifically what I know God wants generally? Will this decision be detrimental to me accomplishing the spiritual goals that I know God has for my life?*

Let me give you an example. A pastor friend of mine told me about a leader in his church who was offered a job promotion. It would have nearly doubled his salary and been a major accomplishment. However, taking the job would have severely hampered his ministry at the church and his time with his young family. He carefully weighed his options and turned down the job offer. Most people would think the guy was nuts for doing that, but he knew generally what God wanted for him and he applied it specifically by turning down the job offer. He didn't believe it to be a life according to wisdom.

You will search in vain for a verse that says specifically, go to such and such a college or marry so and so. We can want to get our heavenly Dr. Marvin on the phone for specific direction, but God doesn't operate that way. He has given us broad parameters and general direction within which we must make decisions.

3. Have I prayed earnestly about it?

One of the greatest tools that we have in knowing God's will is prayer. Does that mean God speaks audibly to us in prayer? No. Someone else might say, why pray if God has ordained

everything? We must remember that ***the primary role of prayer is not to conform God's will to what I want, but to conform my desires to His.*** There is no better way to discern what God's will is than to take it to the Lord in prayer, which is why we absolutely must pray over the decisions of life.

I have at times talked very conversationally with the Lord. *Father, this is what I am thinking. If I do this...and if I do that...* You know what I find? As I pray through a decision, many times the inclinations of my heart change. I was leaning one way, but as I take it to the Lord, my selfish motivation or my anger or my ambition become evident and I realize why I was leaning the direction that I was. Prayer changes us. Not just simple prayers, but real, hard, honest prayers.

You may not be convinced, so let this truth get you: Jesus prayed before He made decisions.

- Jesus fasted (prayed?) before He began His ministry (Matthew 4:2)
- Jesus prayed all night before choosing His disciples (Luke 6:12-13)
- Jesus prayed before His greatest trial (Matthew 26:36-45)
- Jesus taught us to pray that God's will would be done (Matthew 6:10)

If the Son of God had to pray over the decisions of life, how much more do we need to get before the Lord and open our hearts to Him and let His will be burned into our hearts? Let's be honest, isn't it way too often that we rush into a decision and forget to pray about it? Most of the decisions we end up regretting are ones we failed to take to the Lord.

You know what is sad about this? God has told us if we need wisdom, to simply ask. *If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.* (James 1:5) God is the source of all wisdom. He wants to give us wisdom as we need it. But we have to ask for it. This is where God and mothers are different. Mothers will give you their wisdom whether you want it or not. It's a mother's right to share her opinion, amen? God encourages us to ask Him; to pray.

So you've searched your heart to make sure your bottom line is to please God. You have searched the Scriptures to see if there is any direct or general principle to apply. You have taken the matter to the Lord.

4. Seek advice from wise people

Did you know we become like the people we hang out with? This is a small example, but I have found this to be true for my sports team allegiances. When I was in Indianapolis, I was with Colts fans. They talked about the Colts. They cheered for the Colts. I started to like the Colts. I moved up here. Everyone talks about the Bears. I hang out with Bears fans. I like the Bears. I cheer for the Bears. If you hang out with fishermen, fishing rubs off. If you hang out with hunters, hunting rubs off on you. If you hang out with NASCAR people, your neck gets redder. It just happens that way. We become like the people we hang out with.

He who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm. (Proverbs 13:20) Hang out with wise people, their wisdom rubs off on you. Hang out with fools and their foolishness will do the same. This is speaking about a lifestyle of friendship with wise people. What about those key times when a big decision is looming?

Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed. (Proverbs 15:22, also 24:6) One of the greatest assets that we have to make wise decisions is the spiritually wise

people around us. Knowing God's will is a community effort and we need to take advantage of the experience and wisdom that is all around us – people who have already made the decision we're facing. People who have learned from mistakes that can help keep us from repeating them.

I have seen this many times in ministry where we are dealing with some complex issue. We will set up a phone call or meeting with someone who knows it better than us. *What do you think? Do you have any advice for us?* One of the most common sentences in this building should be, *Hey, can I ask for your opinion on something?* Why? Because each of us only sees things through our narrow perspective; the few experiences that we have had. When we bounce things off of a wise and godly man or woman, they bring a wealth of wisdom to the issue.

Sometimes just talking the decision through with someone makes the issue clear. Haven't you found this? As you begin to explain the situation to the person, the obvious answer comes to you and as you are telling them you say, *I think I know what to do!* The person hasn't said anything at all! Have you had that happen? Identify spiritually wise individuals. Go to them. Get their perspective. With many advisors plans succeed. They help us discern what is best.

5. Has God given any biblical models to follow? (Romans 15:4)

The Old Testament is filled with life stories of people that were in similar kinds of situations. *Is there anything to discern from it?*

This is where I do believe it's appropriate to ask the question, *WWJD—what would Jesus Do?* The question assumes that we have a deep understanding of Christ, which most people don't have. Christ is the clearest example we have of someone whose entire life was fully conformed to the will of God. "What would Jesus do?" can be a helpful guide. I have found that an equally helpful question to ask is *WWSD—what would Satan do?* Figure that out and God's will is normally the opposite.

6. Has God providentially (circumstantially) given any guidance?

My whole message next week is on the providence of God, but in case you miss next week, a few things. First, God is the orchestrator of circumstances. He is in control of all things. Therefore, when we are facing a decision we can look at circumstances as possibly indicative of God's guidance. I say possibly because our problem is interpretation of those circumstances. Two people will interpret the same circumstances in different ways. So while we shouldn't ignore them, we also shouldn't see them as definitive. They are merely one part of the decision making process.

7. What does my conscience tell me?

What is my conscience telling me here? God has placed this alarm system within us to help us know when we have made a decision that is contrary to our values. Consciences can be dulled. Consciences can be seared and misled (1 Timothy 4:2). However, we need to pay attention when our conscience is talking.

8. What are my gifts and talents?

God will never want us to do something He hasn't gifted us for. One of the best ways to know the direction that God would have you go is to honestly look at what He has gifted you

to do. If you are a gifted writer and terrible at math, don't try to be an accountant. If you are good at working with your hands but are colorblind, don't think God wants you to be a painter. Our gifts are indications of where God wants us to spend our time. Get an honest assessment. Don't ask your Mom what you are good at. She thinks you are good at everything. Ask someone who will tell you the truth, then direct your life toward maximizing what God has gifted you to do. It's one of the best indications of how God wants you to function in society and in the Church.

Is my goal to please the Lord? Have I searched and studied God's Word? Have I prayed earnestly? Have I gotten wise advice? What would Jesus or Satan do? Are circumstances leading any way? Is my conscience telling me anything? And where would my gifts naturally lead me? If you have honestly asked and worked through each of these questions and three options are still on the table as equally valid, then you need to ask the final question,

9. If everything else is equal, what would be my desires in this?

The problem with Augustine's quote, *Love God and do as you please* is that everyone rushes to question number 9. But pastor you said that if I love God, I can do as I please. It's true, but you know what you will find? If you go through each of these steps in making the decision, by the time you get to the final question, your desires are likely to have changed. You look at the options much differently than when you started. Now the desires of your heart are the same as God's so that what you want to do is what God wants you to do. That is a life according to wisdom.

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