

All to the Glory of God

1 Corinthians 10:23 – 11:1

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²³ "All things are lawful," but not all things are helpful. "All things are lawful," but not all things build up. ²⁴ Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor. ²⁵ Eat whatever is sold in the meat market without raising any question on the ground of conscience. ²⁶ For "the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof." ²⁷ If one of the unbelievers invites you to dinner and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you without raising any question on the ground of conscience. ²⁸ But if someone says to you, "This has been offered in sacrifice," then do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience-- ²⁹ I do not mean your conscience, but his. For why should my liberty be determined by someone else's conscience? ³⁰ If I partake with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of that for which I give thanks? ³¹ So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. ³² Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, ³³ just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved. ¹ Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.

1 Corinthians 10:23 – 11:1

Here we are going to explore the question of how everyday Christians make everyday decisions about everyday matters. As we come to the end of Paul's discussion about food offered to idols, Paul ultimately boils the discussion down to a single verse that is full of glorious, powerful, and substantive biblical truth. "So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (v. 31). This is the verse we will zero in on in our study here.

We need to be very careful with this passage, because this verse, along with a number of other passages we're going to look at, are going to explode some of the more prevalent thoughts that many of us have (myself included) about how we make decisions as Christians, how we live our lives, and even how we think generally about Christian spirituality. In some ways we are playing with dynamite here, so we want to be very, very careful to handle God's Word well.

Let's begin with a news story that may not be true (indeed, it isn't), but could be true:

Man, 91, Dies Waiting for the Will of God

Tupelo, Mississippi. *Walter Houston, described by family members as a devoted Christian, died Monday after waiting 70 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 said. "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 remain in God's will. That was primary to him."

Friends say they liked Walter though he seemed not to capitalize on his talents. "Walter had a number of skills he never got around to using," says longtime friend Timothy Burns. "He worked very well with wood and had a storyteller side to him, too. I always told him, 'Take a risk. Try something new if you're not happy,' but he was too afraid of letting the Lord down."

To his credit, they say, Houston, who worked mostly as a handyman, was able to pay off the mortgage on the couple's modest home.¹

This story is from a parody Christian news site, but it could very well be a true story, because this is how we often think of God's will. That is, we tend to think that God has a secret will for our lives (which is true), but then we think it is our job to figure out God's secret will (which is not true). So, when we face decisions such as what school to go to, whom to marry, what job to take, where to live, what home to buy, what friends to choose, what leadership positions to take at church, what sitcom to TiVo, etc., we tend to believe that if we don't pray just the right way for God's leading, or have just the right feeling or impression inside, or the right nudging from the Holy Spirit, or the right "open door," or the right sign, then we may be operating outside of the will of the Lord. Some live in constant fear of making a train-wreck of their lives and faith because they made a decision outside of God's secret will.

This search for God's secret will leads to all kinds of interesting spiritual techniques and tricks. Perhaps you are looking for a specific "word from the Lord" on certain issues, and your method is to randomly select Bible verses. So, one day you have a pain in your side, you flip open your Bible and point to 1 Cor. 11:28, "Let a person examine himself," and you deduce you ought not go to the doctor.

Or, maybe you look for signs. This is pretty common. I know a young lady who decided to marry someone based on the fact that she saw a shooting star when she was with him. She had prayed for a sign, and this was it. Unfortunately, they are not still married today.

Often times we simply look for some internal feeling or nudging. We may say, "I sense that the Lord is leading me to do this." This is fairly common language among Christians. Maybe it is sometimes right to say it. But we do have to come to terms with the fact that this language is not common in God's Word. In fact, this concept is relatively unheard of in Scripture to describe how everyday Christians make everyday decisions.

So, this is a pretty important question to ask. What does God's Word say about everyday Christians making everyday decisions about everyday matters? How the Bible answers these questions touches on every aspect of our lives.

Now, in our passage here we have a summary of what Paul has been saying over the last several chapters. He affirms their liberty, but he frames that liberty within the bounds of Christian love. So, you may eat whatever you want (vv. 25-26), but "let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor"(v. 24). Eventually in v. 31 he comes to his final conclusion about how the Corinthians ought to make decisions, concerning not

only food offered to idols, but really decisions about pretty much everything. He says, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (v. 31).

As we focus in on this verse, we are going to do three things. First, we will consider how God’s Word speaks to us about the will of God. Second, we will identify several problems that arise from trying to make decisions by somehow determining God’s secret will. And third, we will establish for ourselves a bold, biblical approach to decision making (and generally, living life), not according to God’s secret will, but according to God’s revealed will.

The Bible and the Will of God

First, how does the Bible speak about the will of God? It speaks of God’s will in two distinct ways.

First, it speaks of God’s will as his sovereign plan for all things, in other words, what God has ordained to come to pass. Some call this God’s will of decree. We see this in Ephesians, “In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will” (1:11). Here we see that God’s will for all things is set in stone. What he *wills* will happen, period. God is, without question, in sovereign control of the universe. Sometimes we also call this the *secret* will of God because we don’t know exactly how he will direct all things in the future. We just know that he does.

We read also in Isaiah, “I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me, declaring the end from the beginning and from ancient times things not yet done, saying, ‘My counsel shall stand, and I will accomplish all my purpose’” (Is. 46:9-10). God’s will, in the first sense, refers to his sovereign plan by which all things come to pass.

What about Joseph’s imprisonment and slavery at the hand of his brothers? All part of God’s will. “As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good” (Gen. 50:20).

What about the greatest evil imaginable, Jesus crucified? Although God is not responsible for evil, even the cross was part of God’s will. Thus Peter speaks of “this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God...” (Acts 2:23).

Not even a sparrow falls to the ground apart from God’s will (Mt. 10:29). All creation, every nation, every person, whatsoever comes to pass, is ultimately governed by God’s wise, immutable, and all-encompassing will of decree.

The second way the Bible speaks of God’s will is of his *revealed* will, that is, his desire for how mankind should live. Sometimes this is called God’s will of desire. This includes all of the commandments we have in God’s Word. These are God’s will of desire revealed to us. A simple example comes from 1 Thessalonians 4:3, “For this is the will of God, your sanctification.” God’s revealed will refers to all the things God wants or demands from us in his Word, to obey his law, to repent and believe the gospel, to love God and neighbor, to be sanctified. 1 Corinthians 10:31 is part of God’s revealed will, “whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.”

So, we have God’s will of decree (his secret will), and God’s will of desire (his revealed will). The problem is, somewhere along the way we have gotten the idea that it

is our job to pursue not merely God's revealed will, which is found in the Bible, but also his secret will, which we think is found in things like listening prayer, nudges, internal confirmations, spiritual promptings, signs, visions, fleeces, etc.

This was the dilemma of the man in the fictional news story. He prayed about God's will a lot. He sought every possible means to discern God's will, but he was never quite sure what God's will for his life was, so he didn't really do anything. He just waited his whole life for some sort of confirmation on something, and he lived in fear that he just might somehow step outside of God's secret will for him.

This, of course, is where we really do run into problems when we think this way, so let's consider the second topic we must face, the variety of problems with trying to discern God's secret will.

Problems with Trying to Determine God's Secret Will

Here's the first problem. It's not biblical. Nowhere in Scripture are we ever commanded to try and discern God's secret will. When we say, "I'm just trying to determine God's will for my life," it sounds good, it sounds spiritual, but in reality this concept of "finding God's will" is foreign to God's Word.

At times God does indeed give his people direct guidance in the New Testament. In the book of Acts there are thirteen incidents in which God speaks directly to individuals, and he uses various methods such as visions, angels, prophecy, and direct words from Jesus or the Holy Spirit. Eight of these thirteen occurrences were to two apostles (Paul and Peter). The impression is that these kinds of communications were not normative for the first century church. Also, in every instance, God is the one who takes the initiative to reveal himself. No one goes looking.

Another problem is this, the contemporary Christian approach to determining the secret will of God is subjective, muddled, cloudy, and confusing.

This fall I took my family to a corn maze. The thing was enormous. I always thought that a corn maze would be fun, but in reality I found it quite miserable. You spent your time looking and looking for answers and direction, finding dead end after dead end, never sure where you are or when you'll get out. And this is how we sometimes think of God's secret will. We believe God has a secret map for our lives, and through all kinds of muddled, confusing, and subjective means, we're supposed to somehow discover that map and follow it. We are always seeking God's will, but we can never really be sure that we've found it.² This, ultimately, is a burden we were never meant to carry.

This is why Paul's instructions to the Corinthians is so profoundly refreshing. He doesn't say to them, "Wait for God's leading before you do anything." He doesn't say, "Pray for direction until you sense the right way." Instead, he says, "*Whatever* you do, do it to the glory of God!" Now, there's nothing muddled about that.

While we struggle over the question of who God wants us to marry, we would do well to consider Paul's earlier instructions to the widows of Corinth. He says to them very simply that they are free to marry "whomever they wish" (1 Cor. 7:39). The only guidance given to them is that they must marry in the Lord. They aren't bound to some sort of secret map. They're not constrained within a corn maze, with only one spouse that's not a dead end. They are free to do whatever they wish. And likewise, as we

consider following God's will, we ought to remember that as long as we are following his revealed will, we also are free to do whatever we wish.

Another problem is this, the popular notion that we can somehow step outside of God's secret will (his will of decree) is contrary to the Bible's teaching that nothing can thwart God's plans. Job says, "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted" (Job 42:2). Friends, if we live in constant fear that we are going to somehow step outside of God's secret will, then we don't really understand the reality that God is truly sovereign over every detail of our lives. He numbers our days. He numbers the hairs on our heads. Surely we cannot ever escape his sovereign, perfect, loving, good plan for our lives.

Jesus teaches, "Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows" (Mt. 10:29-31). To live in fear of stepping outside of God's secret will is to ultimately deny God's sovereign power over our lives.

Another problem... when we speak in terms of doing something according to the secret will of God (such as, "The Lord is leading me to take this job over that one," for example), it is sometimes simply an avoidance of personal responsibility for decisions. We could call it a *spiritual cop-out*.

The Reformed pastor Kevin DeYoung tells this story from his college days.

I'll never forget my poor beleaguered roommate talking with me after he took a risk and told a nice young lady that he liked her. They went on a long walk. He was pretty sure she would reciprocate his declaration of affection. But it turned out she wasn't interested. She was a sweet girl, a good Christian. She didn't mean to have bad theology. But instead of just saying "I'm not interested" or "I don't like you" or "Quit stalking me" or something, 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. But I bet at any Christian school there are scores of men and women blaming God for their breakups.³

Often times our super-spiritual language of following God's will is just an excuse not to take personal responsibility for our actions. We talk about following God's secret will so that we don't have to get our hands dirty by following God's revealed will, which calls us to do difficult things.

In my own years of Christian ministry I have seen this happen all too frequently. Someone may say about a particular decision, "It feels right. I have peace about it. I have prayed about it. So yes, God is leading me in this direction." The problem is that this "peace" can supersede or supplant what is clearly written in God's Word. Sometimes I have had to say, "No, what you *feel* is right, the very direction you *feel* the Lord is leading you, is actually contrary to God's written Word." We so easily forget what

Jeremiah says about our own hearts, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jer. 17:9). It is always easier to speak of following the Lord’s secret will than to actually follow the Lord’s revealed will.

One final problem... to speak of God’s *leading* primarily in terms of making life decisions is to misapply the biblical concept of how God really does lead Christians.

Here’s what I mean. The apostle Paul speaks of the Holy Spirit *leading* Christians in just two places, Romans 8:13-14 and Galatians 5:18-23. In neither place is he talking about some sort of mysterious guidance or nudging. Instead, when he speaks of *leading* he is speaking of sanctification. Here’s what he says in Romans, “For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God” (Rom. 8:13-14). Galatians 5, of course, is the famous fruit of the Spirit passage. There, Paul starts by saying, “But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law” (Gal. 5:18), and then he goes on to show that being led by the Spirit means producing the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The Lord’s prayer follows the same pattern, petitioning for God’s leading, a leading which is distinctly about sanctification and growth in holiness. Thus, “lead us not into temptation.”

J.I. Packer says, “We hear much today of altered states of consciousness induced by new age techniques of meditation; it would be well if more attention were paid to the altered state of mind into which new creation by the Spirit brings believers.”⁴ When we become Christians, God gives us his Spirit, not so that we can use it as a magic eight-ball or as a GPS for life, but so that we can be sanctified with a renewed heart and mind. The Old Testament promise of God’s coming Holy Spirit speaks of this very thing, “And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules” (Ez. 36:27). That is what God’s Spirit does. It causes us to walk according to God’s revealed will.

A Bold, Biblical Approach to the Christian Life

Now our task is to answer the question, “How do we build a bold, biblical approach to making decisions and just generally living the Christian life?” And now we see that Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 10:31 really do contain almost all of the guidance we need as Christians, “Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.” We might say it this way, “Do whatever you like, but whatever you do, do it for God’s glory.”

Friends, if you feel like you are living your life in a corn maze, and God has the map but he’s just not showing it to you, this verse liberates you from that maze! Here, as Paul handles the variety of challenges in Corinth, and the difficult life decisions that they had to make, he doesn’t lay constraints upon them based on some vague, cloudy, or muddled sense of God’s leading. Instead he offers them freedom to make many, many different kinds of choices, to marry whom they wish, to eat whatever they like. They are ultimately constrained, not by some vague map of God’s secret will that they have to guess at, but only by the commandment to live their lives for God’s glory.

So, what we need most is not a new technique for listening prayer, but a renewed devotion to glorifying God. We need to pray, not for direction or mystical leading, but for wisdom to understand God’s Word, and for the strength to glorify God even when it’s

hard. And with an increase in biblical wisdom, our decisions may just become much more clear.

To be consumed with discovering God's secret will for our lives is ultimately to be an anxious, passive, and ignorant Christian: anxious, because we constantly fear the future; passive, because we don't do anything without some sort of vague spiritual confirmation; and ignorant, because we've devoted ourselves to the secret things of God, but not the clear and direct Word of God.

But, to be consumed instead with glorifying God in whatever we do is ultimately to become a confident, bold, and wise Christian: confident, not in ourselves, but in God, who has declared the end from the beginning through his awesome sovereignty, and whose sovereign decrees ultimately direct our lives for his glory and our good; bold, because God's revealed will requires boldness and action; and wise, because we have devoted ourselves to knowing and following his revealed will, studying his Word, and always striving to grow in the knowledge of the Lord.

¹ This faux-story posted at www.larknews.com was quoted from Kevin DeYoung, *Just Do Something* (Chicago: Moody, 2009), 75-76.

² See DeYoung, 43: "The conventional approach to the will of God – where God's will is like a corn maze with only one way out and lots of dead ends... or like a Magic 8-Ball that we are supposed to shake around until some generic answer floats to the top – is not helpful. It is not good for decision making. It is not good for our sanctification. And sometimes it is frankly dishonoring to Christ."

³ DeYoung, 50.

⁴ J. I. Packer, "The Ministry of the Spirit in Discerning the Will of God," Bible.org, accessed December 16, 2010, <http://bible.org/seriespage/ministry-spirit-discerning-will-god>.