



THE COMPASS

A TOOL FOR DISCIPLERS

Discerning God's Will

Conversation On the Journey

Foundational to this study is understanding the dramatic difference the coming of the Holy Spirit has made in the daily disclosure of God's will. Open to Acts 1:24-26, which reads:

Then they prayed, "Lord, you know everyone's heart. Show us which of these two you have chosen to take over this apostolic ministry, which Judas left to go where he belongs."

Then they cast lots, and the lot fell to Matthias; so he was added to the eleven apostles.

Probe on this passage a bit, asking them what's going on in the story, what's this casting lots "thingie," and why were they casting them to discern God's will. Answer: In several places in the Old Testament casting lots was used to discern God's will, so this was not vain superstition. God did lead Israel through this practice. Two stone objects called the ummin and thumin, were rolled like dice allowing God providence over chance to make His will known.

So, the question is, and you should probably ask this, "Why don't we cast lots today?"

The answer is found in the placement of this story: just prior to the coming of the Holy Spirit recorded in Acts 2. After Acts 2, there is a distinct change in the narrative of Acts, as we read: the Spirit of the Lord suddenly took Philip away (8:39); the Spirit said to him (10:19); the Spirit told me (11:12); sent on their way by the Holy Spirit (13:4), etc. Luke is telling us God's powerful presence is once again with His people and its hallmark is that He is clearly leading them and making His will known. There is no longer a need for casting lots.

Your disciple should know that one of the coolest things about being a Christian is that God does lead, and will lead them daily in his will.

Now, of course we don't hear an audible voice, so you want to ask your disciple, "How does God make his will known to us?" I would also ask if they can think of a time when God clearly gave them direction and, if so, "How did he do it?"

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This Week's Excursion

One of the identifying traits of a child of God, is that they are led by His Spirit. But learning how to discern God's leading is something that must be taught by a discipler who has learned to hear God's voice and recognizes how He leads. Your objective is to communicate to your disciple the various means by which God discloses His will to us, caution them of potential extremes, and emphasize the role of an obedient heart that is totally yielded to God's will.

Discerning God's Will

There are different ways to answer this question, or rather different ways to categorize the answers, but perhaps the best way is a simple metaphor: on a daily basis, how do you know where you're going? You use your senses, right? (Smell, sight, hearing, touch, and if you lick the pavement, taste.)

Similarly, we discern God's will through using our spiritual senses. You might want to ask your disciple to propose what some of these senses might be. One sense is clearly through Scripture. The Scripture makes clear God's general will on a variety of issues; we don't need to pray if it's God's will for us to rob a bank, or sell crack at the local nursery school. Additionally, God also has the ability to personalize His Word to us. Though you should caution your disciple about taking passages out of their context, you should be careful not to limit the Spirit's ability to lift out of a passage certain ideas and concepts that may be personal in application.

Our second sense we'll call wisdom and it can be found in two places. First, wisdom comes from mature Christians. People who have been in Christ many years have become good detectives in discerning God's will and His ways, and they can help a younger Christian decode what God may be saying. A second source of wisdom is our own. Over years of walking with Christ, we accumulate wisdom of how God speaks and leads. Ask if they can think of something they did as it relates to God's will (decided to date someone because the traffic light turned green), that they would now find silly? You might share a few personal stories here.

The third sense is circumstances. God is providentially at work in and through circumstances. Ask your disciple, "What are some ways you've seen God's will revealed through your circumstances over this past year?" I would also ask, "What might be the danger of simply going by circumstantial clues?"

The answer is that such clues can become very subjective. Here is where you want to bring up an overarching principle of discerning God's will: alignment of our spiritual senses. Often we use multiple senses - sight, smell - to navigate where we are going in the physical world. In the spiritual world, a good student of God's will looks for alignment among their spiritual senses. They look for clues to converge, for the wisdom of mature Christians, and the Scripture to be saying the same thing as the circumstances.

A fourth sense would be our emotions. It's true that emotions can be unreliable without bringing to bear other senses, but God's spirit is not truncated from our emotions and desires, and how we feel about things can be a helpful gauge in discerning God's will. If the thought of being a lawyer makes you nauseous, God is probably not calling you to the Bar.

Last, we'll consider the mind. God can lead us through simple reasoning, and often does - If I eat two pizzas, I will gain weight. God also can bring thoughts and ideas to our minds using just about anything. You might ask your disciple if God has ever done this in their experience? A last category of God speaking to our minds is through dreams, which also has a significant biblical precedent.

At this point it might not be a bad idea to ask, "If there were one area that you could know God's will for sure, what would it be?" Another good question to ask is, "Why do you think God doesn't make it more clear?" One answer is He uses the process to draw us closer to Himself.

Next Steps

Ask of any area where they are seeking to know God's will and talk about it. Ask what God has been showing them so far. And have them take note of clues throughout the week. Also, ask if they really, more than anything, want God's will.

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Discerning God's Will

OK, having looked at the basic spiritual senses, we want to close with a very important principle. Go to Romans 12:1,2:

Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God - this is your spiritual act of worship. 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.

Ask them, "What is connected to knowing God's will?" and "Why does being a living sacrifice enable us to know God's will?"

There is a good bit of data to process when discerning God's will. Honestly, you can twist the data to say something it doesn't say if you're not wholly desiring God's will. Only a heart totally yielded to God can process the information without trying to "fudge" the results. This is one of the things the passage is communicating. A good example to use is relationships. You can always make the data say "marriage," if you want. But if you are fully yielded to Christ, you will be able to recognize, and not gloss over, the clues pointing in other directions. This is the idea of a living sacrifice, totally given over to following God's will in all things.

Summary

We looked at five basic spiritual senses in determining God's leading: wisdom, circumstances, emotions, the mind, and God's word. There are also two over-arching principles that help us to wisely process the clues. First is to look for the convergence of clues, and alignment of our different senses. Do not rely on one sense, or one avenue of information. Second, we must be wholly submitted to God's will, otherwise we will always "fudge" the results.

†End

Side Trails

Nothing fancy or weird here, just straightforward guidance on the topic

The Mystery of God's Will: What Does He Want For Me? Charles Swindoll. Thomas Nelson Publishers.

Discovering God's Will. Warren Myers & Ruth Myers. Nav Press.

How to Know God's Will. Charles Stanley. Nav Press.

Order at christianbook.com



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