

Sermon for Sunday, August 7, 1977, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Senior Pastor
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri 63105

"GOD'S GUIDANCE AND COMMON SENSE"

Romans 8:28-39, 12:1-2

Text: "Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect
Romans 12:2

This morning I want to talk about knowing God's will for your life. How is a person to know what God wants him to do? How is a person to know for sure what God's will for him might be?

Sometimes God's will for us is made clear to us in a vivid, dramatic way. For example look at St. Paul on the road to Damascus. As he travels along suddenly a bright light from heaven shines down upon him and the Bible tells us that he is blinded. That's pretty dramatic. He hears a voice speaking to him, "Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?" He knows it is the voice of the Lord and that voice tells him to go into Damascus and to wait there, that God's going to tell him what to do, and there is no question in Paul's mind. God is making His will for him clear and evident. However, God's leading is not always so clear and dramatic. If it were, most of us wouldn't have a problem in knowing what God wanted us to do. Yet, how many of us regularly have such vivid experiences? Maybe some of us once or twice in a lifetime have an experience as dramatic as that, but we need guidance day by day. And isn't it true in your life that God's guidance is much more indirect? How, then, are you to know God's will for your life?

This morning I would like to suggest four rules for knowing God's will for your life. The first rule is this: you must want to know what God's will is. Do you remember the story in the Old Testament about Abraham who sent his servant back to his homeland to find a wife for his son Isaac? Abraham lived at the time in the land of the Cannanites and he knew God didn't want Isaac to marry into that pagan world. So he sent his most trusted servant back home to find a suitable wife. Can you imagine the sense of responsibility that servant felt? How desperately he wanted to be in God's will! So he prayed as he traveled, "Lord, God of my master Abraham, I pray thee, send me good speed this day and show kindness unto my master Abraham."

Part of our problem is we do not always want to know God's will. What is God's will for you and your money? What is God's will for the way you spend your time? What is God's will for the people you associate with? What is God's will for the kind of life you are living? Do you really want to know?

When I was a young pastor in my first church, a pulpit committee from another city came to visit me and then issued a call for me to come and be their pastor. I went and visited that church and then I prayed about it. I didn't want to go. I didn't like the city, I didn't like the church, I didn't like the house they had for me to live in, and, frankly, I didn't like the salary they offered me. As I prayed, God told me clearly and vividly that he wanted me to go there. But I didn't want to go. For three nights I prayed asking God's will and all the time I knew what it was but I didn't like it. I didn't really want to know God's will because it wasn't what I wanted. Do you ever do that? But what a blessing it is to be in God's will. I finally did what God wanted me to do and there in that church I had the experiences that led to the writing of my two books for Elders and Deacons that have been used across our church now for 15 years. Could God have used me to touch so many lives for him if I had not been obedient? Probably not. So, you have to want to do God's

will, or at least be willing to do God's will.

The second rule for knowing God's will for your life is to listen to the inner voice of the Holy Spirit. This is what I call God's subjective witness. God's spirit will make us feel that a certain course of action is right or that it is wrong. Do you remember when the baby Jesus was taken to the temple by his parents to make sacrifice according to the law of Moses? The Bible tells us that there was a man named Simeon who was looking for the consolation of Israel. And then the Bible says this about Simeon, "the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he should not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. And inspired by the Spirit he came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the law, he took him up in his arms and blessed God..." (Lk 2:25ff) Here was a man who was listening to the leading of God's Spirit.

Or again, look at St. Paul on a missionary journey in Asia Minor. Here is what the Bible says, "And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. And when they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them..." (Acts 16:6f) And because Paul was listening to the Holy Spirit, God called him into Macedonia. When Paul crossed over to the mainland of Europe, God changed the history of the world. Or go back even earlier when a group of Christians were praying and fasting in the city of Antioch and here is what the Bible records, "While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' Then after fasting and praying, they laid their hands on them and sent them off." (Acts 13:2-4) And there you have the birth of the Christian missionary enterprise. How? By men listening to the inner voice of the Holy Spirit.

God will and does speak to us in our hearts, through our subjective feelings, if we are listening. But feeling alone is not enough. You see, sometimes the voices we hear in our hearts are not the voice of God's Spirit. For example, I was once counseling with a married man who admitted that he was having an affair with another woman. Yet, he claimed that God told him in his heart that it was all right. He even claimed that he and his lady friend got down and prayed together before they went to bed. But I assure you the voice he was hearing was not God's voice. He needed the third rule for knowing God's will which is this: look at the Bible to see what it says. I call this God's objective witness. You see, God never contradicts himself. He is always consistent. Therefore, my feelings (which are subject to many kinds of stimuli) may mislead me. I must check them against God's word. If a man thinks God is telling him subjectively that he can commit adultery, all he has to do is check it against God's objective witness. There it is clear, "Thou shalt not commit adultery." God doesn't contradict himself. God never lies. Therefore, the voice he was hearing in his heart was not God. So we have a firm principle. If what I hear in my heart is contrary to what I read in God's word, then I know the voice in my heart is not that of God.

Now, the fact is, God's word may not always give us the particulars we want. I know a fellow that was having some serious trouble one time and he decided that he was going to take God's word and use it for guidance. He would open the Bible and put his finger on some passage of Scripture and he would take that as guidance from God. So, he opened the Bible and put his finger on a passage and he looked and it read, "Judas went and hanged himself." Now God isn't going to give specific instructions for every problem. For example, is it permissible for me to drive 60 miles an hour

with the flow of traffic when the speed limit is 55? Of course the Bible will not give you a specific or particular answer to that kind of question. Yet at the same time, the Bible will lay down a principle to guide us. In this case the Bible tells us to be obedient to the civil government, to be subject to our rulers, as long as we are not required to violate our allegiance to God. So even in our 20th century world, the Bible will give us clear guidance through basic principles of Scripture.

So if I want to know God's will for my life, first I have to truly want to know His will, second, I must listen to the inner voice of the Holy Spirit (the subjective witness), and third, I must search the Scriptures, God's objective witness. The fourth rule for knowing God's will for our lives is this: we must look for the providential witness of God. That is to say, if I truly want to know God's will for my life, if I feel the inner leading of His Holy Spirit, if what I feel is in keeping with God's word, then God will open a door of opportunity for me.

See how it works! Earlier I mentioned St. Paul in Asia Minor and the Bible tells us how he and his fellow missionaries sought to go to different places but the Spirit prevented them. That is, the door didn't open. God didn't provide the opportunity. But when they got to Troas things were different. There God opened the door.

I have a friend who is a minister in another denomination. He felt that God's Spirit was leading him to go to India as a missionary. He wanted to know God's will for his life. He felt God speaking to his heart and saying to him to go to India. He read God's word and the Bible said, "Go into all the world." Everything was in order so far. He sold his house, resigned his church and waited for God to provide the \$5,000 he needed to go overseas. Days, weeks and months went by and the needed money did not appear. Somehow he had either misunderstood God's will for him or he had run ahead of God. He lacked the providential witness, the open door of opportunity. I think about St. Paul. Do you realize that from the time St. Paul was converted on the Damascus Road until the time he began his first missionary journey that over 14 years went by? Paul, on the road to Damascus had this incredible experience and God was speaking to his heart. He had confirmation from the Word. He wanted to be in God's will but the door didn't open. Paul waited 14 years. Finally one day God sent Barnabas to get him and the greatest missionary team in the history of the world came into being. But he waited for the door to open and sometimes it is awfully hard to wait. We want to run ahead of God. But, if we want God's will confirmed--wait for the door to open.

St. Paul once wrote to some friends about the doors God opens and he said, "But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, for a wide door for effective work has opened to me..." (I Cor. 16:8,9) Paul had the final confirmation he needed in order to know God's will, for God had opened a door of opportunity for him.

Knowing God's will for your life is as simple as that--to truly want to know God's will, to listen to His inner Spirit, to measure it against His word, to look for the providential doors that God will open. Let me say two final things about doing God's will. First, the Devil will try to mislead you. He will bring confusion and doubt and try to make you change your course. Back during World War II convoys of ships would cross the ocean. When the convoy reached a danger area each ship would be given a compass heading and a smoke screen would be laid down. When the ships sailed into that smoke they could no longer see clearly. Yet, if a captain deviated from his given compass heading, disaster would follow. Once we are in God's will--once we have been given our compass heading--never deviate. We may not be able to see the way; we may not be able to see our port, but we know who gave us our heading and we will not change our course.

The second thing is this. God's will may not seem like common sense to the world. Was it common sense for the children of Israel to flee from Egypt by way of the Red Sea? No, but God had a plan. Was it common sense for Noah to build that ark? No, and his neighbors thought him a fool. But God had a plan. To the outsider, to the one who stands outside the Christian faith, what we do may not make much sense in terms of this world. But, as Jesus said, we are not of this world, but He has chosen us out of the world.

What is God's will for you--are you in the will of God this morning? You see, from the Christian perspective, that's the only thing that really makes any sense.

See how it worked. Earlier I mentioned St. Paul in Acts 13 and the Bible tells us how he and his fellow missionaries sought to go to different places but the Spirit prevented them. That is, the door didn't open. God didn't provide the opportunity. But when they got to those places where different doors were opened, there God opened the door.

I have a friend who is a minister in another denomination. He felt that God's Spirit was leading him to go to India as a missionary. He wanted to know God's will for his life. He felt God speaking to his heart and saying to him to go to India. He went. He said his house, resigned his church and waited for God to provide the \$2,000 he needed to go overseas. Day, week and month went by and the needed money did not appear. Somehow he had either misremembered God's will for him or he had run ahead of God. He lacked the providential witness, the open door of opportunity. I think that St. Paul, too, you realize that from the time St. Paul was converted on the Damascus Road until the time he began his first missionary journey that over 14 years went by. Paul, on the road to Damascus had this incredible experience and God was speaking to his heart. He had conviction from the Lord. He wanted to be in God's will but the door didn't open. Paul waited 14 years. Finally one day God sent Barnabas to get him and the greatest missionary team in the history of the world came into being. But he waited for the door to open and sometimes he is awfully hard to wait. We want to run ahead of God. But, if we want God's will continued--wait for the door to open.

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