

HOW TO KNOW GOD'S WILL

Romans 12:2

By Andy Manning

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Life is filled with decisions. The average person makes about 70 decisions a day, 25,000 a year, and 1,875,000 over the course of 75 years. That means the difference between people who succeed in life and those who don't comes down to the ability to make really good decisions.
2. Think about the big decisions you have to make in your life. Who to marry and when; when and how many kids to have; where to send your kids to school; all the decisions that go with raising kids; whether or not to quit your job; whether or not to start a new business; your choice of friends; where to go to college, and what to study; who do date; when to start dating; whether or not to accept that transfer. Life is filled with decisions. Some big, some little.
3. Wouldn't it be great to be able to know God's will for your decisions?
4. The Bible tells us there is a way to discern God's will.
5. Don't misunderstand.
 - i. I'm not saying that if you do a, b, and c, then God will audibly speak to you. I'm saying that the Bible gives us a formula, a way to live, so that God's will regarding many decisions will be clear; it will be obvious.
 - ii. I'm not saying that if you follow this formula then God's will be obvious with every decision. For example, who to pick for your fantasy football team, or whether to buy a white car or a silver car? But regarding your morality, your relationships, your finances, your relationship with God, this formula will help you discern God's will and make the right choices.
6. Before we get into it the text, let's talk about some wrong ways to seek God's will in your decisions.

II. WRONG WAYS TO SEEK GOD'S WILL

1. Putting out a fleece (a.k.a. asking for a sign)

- i. In Judges 6, God called Gideon to lead the Israelites to defeat the Midianites. Gideon asked for a sign. He put a wool fleece on the ground at night and asked God to make the fleece wet, but the ground dry. When he woke up the next morning, that is what happened. Then Gideon asked for another sign. He said put a wool fleece on the ground again at night, but this time he asked the Lord to make the ground wet and the fleece dry. Again, when he went to check on it the next morning, that's what happened.
- ii. Putting out a fleece is simply asking God for a sign. Should we ask God for a sign? I don't advise it.
 1. First, the story of Gideon is descriptive, not prescriptive. It describes Gideon asking for a sign, but it doesn't say that we should follow his example. People do many things in the Bible that we shouldn't imitate. Jacob married two sisters, and then he married their two slaves and had children with all of them, but that's not something we

should imitate. The Bible never instructs us to seek God's will by asking for a sign.

2. Second, on two occasions Jesus condemned people for asking for signs (Mt 12:39; 16:1-4). He said "an evil and adulterous generation demands a sign."
3. Third, God is not required to play along. God is not bound by our prayers. He answers when He wants, how He wants. There's no promise in Scripture that says that if you ever ask for a sign, God will always give it. God has many ways of revealing His will and guiding us, and He may choose a different way.
4. Fourth, Christians today have to resources that people in Gideon's time lacked. We have the complete word of God with all of its wisdom. Gideon only had the first five books of the Bible, and there probably weren't many copies circulating. We also have the indwelling Holy Spirit who promises to guide us into all truth. Back then the Holy Spirit didn't indwell all believers; He only came up on select individuals to empower them for special assignments. Today we don't need signs because we have access to the word and the Spirit.
5. Fifth, I've never known anyone to actually ask for a sign the way that Gideon did. First, he asked for an impossible sign; something that would be unmistakable; something supernatural. Don't ask for a shooting star, or to hit all green lights on the way to work. Ask God to make it snow in July. That's a sign, and I've never heard of anyone doing that except in the Bible. Second, Gideon played by the rules. When God showed him the sign, he led the Israelites into battle. Often what we do is we ask for a sign, but then we ignore it. We say, "God, if you want me to do it, then let all the lights be green on the way to work." Well, you hit a couple of red lights, but you still do it. You ignored the very sign you asked for.
6. Sixth, don't forget that Satan has the ability to produce signs and wonders as well.
 - a. **Matthew 24:24** "For false messiahs and false prophets will arise and perform great signs and wonders to lead astray, if possible, even the elect."
 - b. When Moses turned his staff into a snake to prove to Pharaoh that God had sent him, Pharaoh's men did the same thing with their staffs.
 - c. So, personally, I don't ask for signs.

2. Casting lots (a.k.a. flipping a coin)

- i. In the Bible the Jews often made decisions by casting lots. It is mentioned seventy times in the Old Testament and seven times in the New Testament. Should we make decisions by casting lots? Once again, while we do read of

casting lots in the Bible, we are not instructed to do it. As well, we are not told what it means, or how to do it. We don't even know what a lot is.

- ii. Some people think that casting lots is the equivalent of flipping a coin, but there's no way to know that.
- iii. As well, if Satan can produce signs and miracles, then he can also cause a coin to flip the wrong way.
- iv. I don't think flipping a coin is a reliable way seek God's will.

3. Reading too much into circumstances (a.k.a. being an idiot)

- i. A common mistake Christians make is reading too much into circumstances. Here are some examples.
 - 1. Someone says, "I think God wants me to run for mayor of Lafayette." "Really? Why?" I reply. You say, "Because three things happened. Last week a friend of mine said I would make a good mayor. Yesterday the mayor of Lafayette resigned. And this morning on the way to church, they played a song by John Mayer."
 - 2. Or someone says, "I think I met my future wife." "Really? Who is she?" I met her at the grocery store yesterday. She's a cashier. We got to talking, and it turns out we have the exact same birthday; we both have three siblings; and we have the same favorite food – sushi. It's meant to be!"
- ii. Both of those are examples of reading too much into circumstances.
- iii. Circumstances can be highly misleading. Hardship is not always a sign that you are headed in the wrong decision. Success, or ease, is not always a sign that you are headed in the right direction. Just because you see an open door doesn't mean you should walk through it. Just because you see a closed door doesn't mean you should walk away; sometimes you need to keep knocking. Failure doesn't mean you should give up; sometimes it means you need to learn from your mistakes and try again. There is such a thing as a coincidence.
- iv. And don't forget. Satan has the ability to create misleading circumstances. Just as he can produce signs and wonders, he can create circumstances.
- v. God can speak through circumstances, but you need to be very careful about reading too much into them.

4. Listening to manipulators (a.k.a. being gullible)

- i. Unfortunately, there are "Christian" manipulators out there who try to control others by claiming that God spoke to them. They say, "God told me that you should (give me something; be my spouse; do something for me, etc.)" Be very careful about people like that. This is spiritual abuse.
- ii. Does God still speak to people? Yes. But anybody can claim that God spoke to them, and there's no way to disprove it.
- iii. Many people over the centuries have played the "God card" to manipulate people. They are called false prophets, and the Bible says to beware of them.
- iv. **Matthew 24:11** "Many false prophets will rise up and deceive many."

- v. When someone says, “God told me you should...,” here’s what you do. On your way to work or school, ask God to make every light green. I’m just kidding. Here’s what you do. Take it with a grain of salt. Pray about it. Get some counsel from other Christians. Consider the source. Is this person godly? Do they have a good reputation among other Christians? Are they a respected member of their church? And move very slowly and cautiously.
- vi. These are four wrong ways to seek God’s will. Let’s look at how the Bible says we should seek God’s will.

5. Relying on feelings (a.k.a. peace)

- i. Some people say that you can discern God’s will by a sense of peace. If you feel a sense of peace about it, they say, then it is God’s will.
- ii. Feelings are very unreliable.
- iii. Think about Christ. Christ knew that God wanted Him to go to the cross. But Christ did not feel peace about it. He felt turmoil, and stress, and anguish. He was in so much turmoil that he experienced hematohidrosis – he sweat drops of blood. It is a rare condition caused by extreme stress. Christ didn’t feel peace about God’s will.
- iv. As well, feelings are deceptive.
- v. **Jeremiah 17:9** “The heart is more deceitful than anything else, and incurable—who can understand it?”
- vi. This verse is saying that your feelings can betray you. Your feelings can deceive you. Don’t rely upon your feelings.

III. TEXT: Romans 12:2

1. **Romans 12:2** “Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God.”
 - i. This verse has a negative command, a positive command, and then a purpose clause.
 1. Negative command: Do not be conformed to this age.
 2. Positive command: Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.
 3. Purpose clause: So that you may discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God.
 - ii. There are four steps to knowing God’s will.

IV. FOUR STEPS TO KNOW GOD’S WILL

1. Totally dedicate yourself to doing God’s will.

- i. When you are studying a verse, it’s important to read it in context. Look at what comes before it and after it. Only then can you accurately interpret it. When you read Romans 12:2 in context, notice the verse that immediately precedes it.
- ii. **Romans 12:1** “Therefore, brothers and sisters, in view of the mercies of God, I urge you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God; this is your true worship.”
- iii. There’s no reason to separate verse one from verse 2. In other words, discerning God’s will is not just tied to not conforming to this age and being

transformed by the renewing of your mind, but also to presenting your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God.

- iv. To present your body as a living sacrifice means to totally dedicate your life to God. It is the commitment to do God's will in every arena of your life, every day, all day, in all places, in all circumstances, no matter the cost. It is surrendering every part of yourself to God's control. It is praying, "Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Mt 6:10). It is praying, "Not my will, but Yours, be done" (Lk 22:42).
- v. What does totally dedicating yourself to God's will have to do with discerning God's will? God only reveals His will to those who are committed to doing it.
- vi. Let's say you ask to borrow my truck. I'm only going to let you borrow my truck if I am sure that you are going to take care of it. God is the same with His will. He is only going to reveal His will to you if He is sure that you are going to take care of it; if He is sure that you are going to obey it.
- vii. If you have asked God to reveal His will and He isn't making it clear to you, maybe it's because He knows that if He told you, you wouldn't obey it.
- viii. God has two wills for your life: a general will, and a specific will. God's general will is His revealed will. It is the same for everyone. It is clearly laid out in the commands, and principles, and doctrines in the Bible. God's specific will is His concealed will. It is what He wants you to do that is not clearly laid out in Scripture – what college to go to, what to major in, when to start dating, when to get married, etc. If you want God to reveal His specific will, then you need to totally dedicate yourself to His general will. If you want to know God's concealed will, then dedicate yourself to His revealed will.
- ix. When I was a kid, if I wanted seconds, I had to clean my plate. That's how it is with God's will. If you want God's specific will, then you need to clean your plate with God's revealed will. Don't go to God with a full plate of His revealed will that you are ignoring, asking Him to show you what to do. He's going to say, "You go clean your plate first, then come back for seconds."
- x. **Psalm 25:12** "Who is the person who fears the Lord? He will show him the way he should choose."
 1. What does it mean to fear the Lord? To be totally dedicated to God's will. That's the person to whom God reveals His will.

2. Do not be conformed to this age.

- i. **Romans 12:2** "Do not be conformed to this age"
- ii. What is this age? Think of history being divided into two ages: Before Christ comes back, and after Christ comes back. This present age is before Christ comes back. The next age is after Christ comes back. After Christ comes back, He will destroy all evil, and cast Satan and demons and unbelievers in hell. He will completely renew creation. But right now in this age, the world is dominated by Satan. It is full of evil. That's the age that is spoken of here.
- iii. "Age" (Gk. *aión*) is often translated "world" (ESV, NIV, NLT, KJV, etc.). The NT uses the word "world" in three main ways:

1. Planet earth as opposed to heaven, or the moon. Jn 17:24
 2. All the people of the world. Jn 3:16
 3. The evil world system with all its sinfulness and corruption. 1 Jn 2:15-17. The word “age” here in Romans 12:2 is synonymous with this last meaning.
- iv. The Bible says this evil world system or evil age is dominated by three values.
1. **1 John 2:15-16** “15 Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 16 For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride in one’s possessions—is not from the Father, but is from the world.”
 - a. The lust of the flesh: The passion for pleasure. The desires to feel good.
 - b. The lust of the eyes: The passion to possess. The desire to have.
 - c. The pride in one’s possessions (“the pride of life”, ESV, NIV, KJV): The passion for position. The desire to be.
 - d. Sex, salary, and status. Girls, gold, and glory.
 2. This is what this world system is all about. The devil, through the world, is constantly telling that in order to feel happy and significant, in order to truly live, then we need to run after these things.
 3. And that’s the way most people live. They are running after pleasure, possessions, and position.
- v. If you want to know God’s will, do not conform to this age, this evil world system.
- vi. Look at the word “conform”.
1. The Gk. *syschematizo*, means to be conformed to a pattern or mold.
 2. Do you know what a mold is? It’s an empty container into which you pour a liquid that you want to be the same shape as the container when it becomes hard. This world is like a mold, and you are like the liquid. The world is trying to mold you into its shape. Don’t let that happen.
 3. Look at how other Bible versions put it:
 - a. **Phillips** “Don’t let the world around you squeeze you into its own mold”
 - b. **NIV** “do not be conformed to the pattern of this world”
 - c. **NLT** “don’t copy the behavior and customs of this world”
 - d. **Amp** “Do not be conformed to this world (this age), [fashioned after and adapted to its external, superficial customs]
 - e. **GW** “Don’t become like the people of this world”
 - f. **NCV** “Do not be shaped by this world”
 4. The word “conform” is made up of two words. “Form” means structure or system. “Con” means with. For example, chili con carne means beans with meat. “To conform means to be with it. To be

with the system. To be a part of the leading, acceptable structures of the current world system” (R.C. Sproul).

- vii. In his sermon on this passage, Dr. R.C. Sproul noted that around the age of 13 we come to realize that there is a bigger world than just our family. There is a society; we have peers; and they are constantly measuring and judging us. Suddenly our deepest and greatest desire is to be accepted by our peers; to be liked; to be praised. But the price for approval and acceptance is high: conformity. We need to wear the right things; and listen to the right things; and watch the right things; and say the right things; and have the right opinion about things. And this desire for approval, to be liked, to be praised, never goes away. It decreases, but it never goes away. We don't want to be criticized, rejected, teased, ridiculed, mocked, marginalized, cast out, disrespected. And so there is a natural tendency to conform for the sake of acceptance. But Romans 12:2 says to resist this natural urge. Don't conform to the world.
- viii. The Germans have a word for “world,” or “age.” It is zeitgeist. “Zeit” means age, or time; “geist” means spirit, or ghost. Zeitgeist means spirit of the age. Whatever's in style. Whatever is cool. Whatever is politically correct. Whatever is acceptable by culture at large. In the 1800s there was a famous German Philosopher named Friedrich Nietzsche. He was famous for saying, “God is dead.” He was a harsh critic of the zeitgeist. He said that most Germans were like sheep who blindly and cowardly followed the crowd. Most people adopt the herd mentality, just following the herd. To Nietzsche, the superman (Urbemensch) was the nonconformist; the person who refused to blindly follow the crowd; the person who lived by his own code of values; the person who would dare to leave the herd and think for himself.
- ix. This is a command to be a nonconformist. But we are not to live by our own code. Instead we are to be nonconformists because we live by the Bible's code.
- x. The command is not to reject whatever is in style just because it is in style. The command is to not conform to the evil system around us.
- xi. Here's what this means in daily practice.
 1. **Ephesians 5:17 (LB)** “Don't act thoughtlessly, but try to find out and do whatever the Lord wants you to.”
 2. Don't just do what's normal. Don't just blindly adopt the world's customs, and ways, and traditions, and styles. Don't blindly copy the way the world talks, and dresses, and thinks. Don't blindly copy the way the world raises their kids; the way the world disciplines their kids; the way the world educates their kids. Don't just blindly copy the way the world handles their money. Don't just blindly copy the world's ideas about marriage. Don't just blindly copy the world's ideas about time-management, and body image, and entertainment, and sex, and gender, etc. Don't live thoughtlessly, but seek God's will in everything; try to figure out what God wants you to do.

3. We live in such an evil world that I can almost guarantee you that if it's normal, then it's probably not God's will; if everybody's doing it, God probably doesn't want you doing.
 4. To obey this command you have to be willing to be different. You have to be willing to be teased. You have to be willing to be uncool and out of style.
- xii. If your goal is to be cool, or in style, or to be liked, then you are going to miss God's will. And if you live thoughtlessly, if you are an early adopter, just adopting to whatever is in, then you will miss out on God's will.

3. Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

- i. **Romans 12:2** "Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind"
- ii. Instead of being conformed to the world, we must be "transformed."
- iii. The Greek word for transformed is *metamorphoo*, from which we get our English word metamorphosis. It means a change in outward appearance. The same word is used of Christ's transfiguration. Jesus went up on a mountain with Peter, James, and John, and His appearance changed in front of them. In the same way we are to be transformed in our attitude and actions to become more and more like Jesus.
- iv. Notice that this command is in the passive tense. It means that we cannot transform ourselves; rather, it is something that God does to us.
- v. But this is a command, which means that there is a role we must play in the transformation process. There is something we must do. What is our role? "Renewing" our minds. We must learn to think like God; to see the world as God does; we must learn God's principles, and commands, and doctrines. We do that through the study of Scripture. As we renew our minds, God will transform us to be more and more like Christ.
- vi. So, the idea here is that as avoid conforming to the world, and as we become more and more like Christ, we will be able to discern God's will. God will become easier and easier to see.
- vii. So, the key is to renew your mind.
- viii. **R.C. Sproul** "The key method Paul underscores as the means to the transformed life is by the 'renewal of the mind.' This means nothing more and nothing less than education. Serious education. In-depth education. Disciplined education in the things of God. It calls for a mastery of the Word of God. We need to be people whose lives have changed because our minds have changed. True transformation comes by gaining a new understanding of God, man, and the world. What we are after ultimately is to be conformed to the image of Christ. We are to be like Jesus... our humanity is to mirror and reflect the perfect humanity of Jesus... To be conformed to Jesus we must firsts begin to think like Jesus. We need the mind of Christ. We need to value the things He values and to despise the things He despises. We need to have the same priorities He has. We need to consider things weighty that He considers weighty. That cannot happen without a mastery

of His word. The key to spiritual growth is in-depth Christian education that requires a serious level of sacrifice." (*The Holiness of God*, p. 210.)

- ix. The best way to get started with renewing your mind is to read it daily, and listen to it on Sundays, and discuss it with other believers in a small group.

4. Trust in the superiority of God's will.

- i. **Romans 12:2** "Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God."
- ii. God's will is described with three adjectives:
 - 1. Good. It is good for others. When you do God's will, it will benefit your spouse, your children, your church family, your friends. You become a blessing to everyone around you.
 - 2. Pleasing. It pleases God. It furthers God's kingdom. It glorifies His name.
 - 3. Perfect. It is the best plan for you. What is better than perfect? Nothing. Perfection cannot be improved or topped. If God's will is perfect, then it is the best plan for your life. If you want the best life, the happiest, most significant, most purposeful, most meaningful, most abundant life, then you need to live in the center of God's will.
- iii. To know God's will, you must trust in the superiority of God's will and plan for your life. Otherwise you won't seek it; and when it is revealed, you will reject it.
- iv. This is how the devil gets us to miss out on God's plan. He comes along and says, "If you do God's will, you'll be miserable. You'll miss out. You will miss out on the best life. You need pleasure, possessions, and position; girls, gold, and glory."
- v. You must trust two things about God in order to know His will. God is love; He wants what is best for you. Second, God knows everything; He knows what is best for you.
- vi. Only then will you have the strength to totally dedicate yourself to God's will; only then will you have the strength to not be conformed to the world; only then will you have the strength to be transformed by the renewing of your mind.

V. CONCLUSION

- 1. Sometime after Lydia met me, God told her that we were going to get married. This was about a year before we started dating. This was before we even became friends. But she never came to me and told me that God told her that. She just waited patiently for God to work it all out, and He did. God doesn't usually reveal His will to us like that, but there is a way for you to know God's will.
- 2. When you follow these steps, God's will becomes clear. God is able to direct you, and guide you along the best pathway for your life. I'm not saying that God will speak audibly to you. I'm saying that the right path will be easy to discern.