

Pursuing/Discerning God's Will

Graduation Sunday

May 21, 2017

Call to Worship:

¹¹ For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. ¹² Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. ¹³ You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart.

Jeremiah 29:11-13 (ESV)

Scripture:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

Romans 12:1-2 (ESV)

Today is Graduation Sunday, the day we set aside each year to honor our high school graduates. This year we will be honoring seven graduates during our pot-luck fellowship meal immediately following the 2nd service: six who are regular attenders here at church and one who has been a regular attender of our MYF throughout her four years of high school, and I think even long before that.

This is a milestone event in the lives of these youth. It marks the time when they go from being a youth to being an adult. Just like that! This week or next week you'll walk across the stage, receive that diploma, and your life will be changed forever more. It will be no more fun and games. You will be expected to know exactly where you're going to college, what you are going to college for, how long you will be going to college and what job you are going to have when you graduate from college. Hopefully it will be a job that pays enough so that at some point in your lifetime you will be able to pay off all that debt you accumulated in all those years of college.

According to a recent Forbes article (Feb. 21, 2017), student loan debt in the United States is now the second highest consumer debt category behind only mortgage debt. The average student in the class of 2016 had debt of more than \$37,000. More than two million people in the U.S. have student loan debt of more than \$100,000 and almost a half a million people have student loan debt of more than \$200,000. Interestingly, as the economy and job market is growing (ever so slightly), and the unemployment rate is dropping, the number of people defaulting on their college loans is increasing. Welcome to America in the 21st century.

Not to be a downer to those graduates who are going off to college, but we need to be realistic. The decisions that we make today have consequences that affect us for a long time. As much pressure as high school students today feel to have it all figured out – what major they want to take leading to the exact job they want to have when they graduate - the reality is, according to the National Center for Educational Statistics, about 80% of students will change their major at least once during their years in college. On average, college students change their major three

times. So to say that you have to have it all figured out before going off to college, is just not the reality. The reality is to recognize that and the challenge today is to try to figure out how to navigate all that without accumulating too much debt.

But today I would like to talk about something that is even more important than trying to figure out exactly what we want to do when we grow up, or how much money we're going to make, and even whether we're going to go to college or not. What I want to talk about today is Discerning God's will in all the decisions of our life. Not just the big decisions but the small decisions as well. Because if we can make the right choices in the small decisions, chances are we will make the right choices in the big decisions and vice-a-versa, if we make bad choices in the small decisions, we're probably going to make bad choices in the big decisions.

The beginning of Romans 12, which is the beginning of how God wants us to live our lives as Christians who have accepted the great mercy that God has given us in Jesus Christ, repenting of our own sinfulness and putting our faith in Jesus as the only source of our salvation, and Lord of our lives, begins:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

Romans 12:1-2 (ESV)

Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines discernment as the quality of being able to grasp and comprehend what is obscure; the power to see what is not evident to the average mind. "Discern" meaning to detect with the eyes; or to detect with senses other than vision; or to recognize as separate and distinct – to discriminate between two things, i.e. right and wrong.

Those are the secular definitions of discernment and discern, and in many ways they are helpful, but Christian Discernment is both similar and different. Christian discernment takes the secular definition into account, but brings the triune God of Father, Son and Holy Spirit into it. Today we are looking at "Discerning God's Will" as individuals, but next week we begin a new series entitled "Discerning God's Will Together."

Ruth Haley Barton, who I consider to be one of my mentors and who I will be studying with, along with 70 other pastors from around the country in Chicago, Monday – Wednesday of this week, whose book Pursuing God's Will Together, is one of the resources we will be drawing from for the series, defines Christian Discernment as – the capacity to recognize and respond to the presence and the activity of God, both in the ordinary moments and in the larger decisions of our lives.

Discernment and doing the will of God through the help of God's Word (both the written word found in Scriptures and the living Word, Jesus Christ) and the Holy Spirit, is what distinguishes Christian discernment from any other kind of discernment.

Barton says, “Christian discernment is challenging because it requires us to move beyond reliance on human thinking and planning to a place of deep listening and to responding to the Spirit of God within us and among us.”

When we make decisions, whether big or small, we should be making them not just on what we like, or what we think is right and wrong, or what our society tells us is right and wrong, but the decision should be reflective of what God would want us to do and what He sees as right and wrong. We set ourselves up for failure if we think it is easy.

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Does God really care about what college or university you go to? Yes! What might be right or wrong for you might be different for someone else. Does God care about what you major in? Yes! Does God care about what job you do after you graduate or if you don’t go to college? Yes! The bottom line is God cares about everything we do. Does He care about how much money we make? No, probably not. But He does care about what we do with the money we make. And he probably cares about how much debt we go into – whether it be for college, or buying things such as our homes, car and other things. I like the NIV translation of verse 2: *Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world.*

What God cares most about is do we bring Him glory and honor in whatever it is we do. And we can bring Him glory and honor to God in just about any job, though there are some that certainly don’t, and you probably don’t need me to tell you what some of those jobs might be. But we can dishonor God in just about any job as well. We can dishonor God in ministry jobs. We have a greater chance of dishonoring God in our ministry jobs than any other. There is a reason why God gives qualifications for pastors, elders and deacons in the Bible, because when we fall, and we’re all capable of falling, it does great harm to the church, the body of Christ here on earth today. We don’t have to look far. The different newspapers and media outlets are full of stories of pastors who have fallen. There are not too many churches in our own community that haven’t been affected at some point in their history. And it takes a long time for churches to recover.

But it’s not just the leaders who are responsible, it’s all Christians. The non-Christian world is watching us and just waiting for us to fall and to see our response when we do. That’s when it becomes even more important discerning God’s will.

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind.
Romans 12:1 (ESV)

That should take away any doubt that Christianity is more than just a religion of our emotions. God has given us humans our minds for a very important reason. “That by testing we may discern what is the will of God, what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God.”

There are some decisions in our lives that are pretty clear in Scripture, though we live in a world that is mostly blinded to the words of Scripture. We live in a world today where many who even claim to be Christian seem to be blinded to the words of Scripture. The authority that the written Word of God once held in the church, does not seem to have that same authority today. So we pick and choose those commands of God and Jesus that we like and disregard the others. Or we try and pick the Scriptures apart – does it really mean that, or that was back then, surely it doesn't hold for today. And at some level we do need to do that – that's one of the definitions of discernment – to pick apart, to discriminate, to determine right from wrong. And at some level we are all still blinded to the words of Scripture:

Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known. 1 Cor. 13:12 (NIV)

But again, there are some things that are pretty clear in Scripture and when we disregard them, we disregard them at our own peril, and if we teach them, even greater peril. The disciple James warned:

Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly. James 3:1 (NIV)

But there are a lot of things that are not spelled out so clearly in the Bible. You will not find what College or University you should attend in the Bible. You will not find what job you should have in the Bible. You will not find whether you should get married or not, in the Bible. Though if you are a believer in Christ, it tells you that if you believe God is calling you to get married, what you should look for in your spouse, but many believers disregard that.

Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? 2 Cor. 6:14 (NIV)

¹¹ *For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope* Jeremiah 29:11(ESV)

God has a plan for every single one of us. And in the midst of that plan he gives us free will. He gives us free will to choose, choices. And somehow in God's great providence and sovereignty He works with our choices. Sometimes we make good choices and sometimes we make bad choices.

It's like we're going on a journey that we have never been on before, but God has given us a map. The map is called the Bible or the Scriptures. The map contains all the main roads – the interstates, the state roads, but the map doesn't give us all small roads – the town roads and the dirt roads - that we must travel down during our life here on earth. And when we get to the forks in the roads, we need to make choices. A lot of times it isn't even the difference between a good choice and a bad choice, it might be a choice between a good choice and a good choice, and we really don't know which one is better. But God works with our choices. He even works with our bad choices. Somewhere up ahead we're going to get to another fork in the road, and we're going to have to make another choice. If we've been making bad choices, God is always calling us back to choose to get back on the right road, to make our way back to the state road, or better yet, to the interstate.

²⁸ *And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.* ²⁹ *For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.* ³⁰ *And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.* Romans 8:28-30 (ESV)

Most of all, God's will for our lives as Christians is that we be conformed to the image of his Son, Jesus Christ. That is not an easy task and it is something that we cannot do on our own. We can only accomplish it through the grace of God and by the power of the Holy Spirit. And if we are being conformed into the image of Jesus, then the decisions that we make, whether big or small, would be the decisions that Jesus would make if He were in our shoes making those decisions.

On Friday I received word that one of my other mentors, Chuck Temple, who was one of the pastors at Vineyard Christian Fellowship in Bellefontaine, passed away very suddenly and unexpectedly. For anybody that knew him, including just about every other pastor, Chuck Temple was a very special man who will be greatly missed, not only by his family and his church family, but by the entire Logan County Christian community. He had a very unique ability to display both the grace of God and not to compromise God's word in the midst of that grace. He was so special that a few years ago I sought him out and I asked him if I could meet with him once a month, an invitation which he graciously accepted. Once a month since then I have met with Chuck and two other senior pastors over coffee and donuts and mostly to soak up all they learned over their many years of ministry. It will never be the same without Chuck leading the group.

But over the past year it was almost like he knew his time here on earth might be getting short and he shared how he believed that God had put him in a position of influence. An influence in his family, his church, and in the community. He felt he was called to be "an influentior of righteousness," an "influentior of God's righteousness." Ultimately, as Christians, we are all called to be "influentiors of God's righteousness," because whether we like it or not, once we make the claim that we are Christian, we are either influencing others for Christ's righteousness or against Christ's righteousness in everything we say and do. That's why discerning God's will in every decision we make, whether large or small, becomes so very important. And if you are young, college age, or young adult, I would encourage you to seek out a good mentor or two, someone who is a good influentior for God and Christ's righteousness, someone to help you make those decisions when you're trying to discern God's will for your life.