

Go!
Discerning God's Will Together – Part III
 June 25, 2017

Call to Worship:

Blessed is the one who does not walk in step with the wicked or stand in the way that sinners take or sit in the company of mockers, ² but whose delight is in the law of the LORD, and who meditates on his law day and night. ³ That person is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither— whatever they do prospers.

⁴ Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away. ⁵ Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous. ⁶ For the LORD watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to destruction.

Psalm 1 (NIV)

Scripture Reading:

When all these blessings and curses I have set before you come on you and you take them to heart wherever the LORD your God disperses you among the nations, ² and when you and your children return to the LORD your God and obey him with all your heart and with all your soul according to everything I command you today, ³ then the LORD your God will restore your fortunes and have compassion on you and gather you again from all the nations where he scattered you. ⁴ Even if you have been banished to the most distant land under the heavens, from there the LORD your God will gather you and bring you back. ⁵ He will bring you to the land that belonged to your ancestors, and you will take possession of it. He will make you more prosperous and numerous than your ancestors. ⁶ The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live. ⁷ The LORD your God will put all these curses on your enemies who hate and persecute you. ⁸ You will again obey the LORD and follow all his commands I am giving you today. ⁹ Then the LORD your God will make you most prosperous in all the work of your hands and in the fruit of your womb, the young of your livestock and the crops of your land. The LORD will again delight in you and make you prosperous, just as he delighted in your ancestors, ¹⁰ if you obey the LORD your God and keep his commands and decrees that are written in this Book of the Law and turn to the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul. The Offer of Life or Death

¹¹ Now what I am commanding you today is not too difficult for you or beyond your reach. ¹² It is not up in heaven, so that you have to ask, "Who will ascend into heaven to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" ¹³ Nor is it beyond the sea, so that you have to ask, "Who will cross the sea to get it and proclaim it to us so we may obey it?" ¹⁴ No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.

¹⁵ See, I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. ¹⁶ For I command you today to love the LORD your God, to walk in obedience to him, and to keep his commands, decrees and laws; then you will live and increase, and the LORD your God will bless you in the land you are entering to possess.

¹⁷ But if your heart turns away and you are not obedient, and if you are drawn away to bow down to other gods and worship them, ¹⁸ I declare to you this day that you will certainly be destroyed. You will not live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to enter and possess.

¹⁹ This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live ²⁰ and that you may love the LORD your God, listen to his voice, and hold fast to him. For the LORD is your life, and he will give you many years in the land he swore to give to your fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Deuteronomy 30:1-20 (NIV)

This morning we are looking at Part III, the final step in discerning God's will together. So far we have looked at Part I – "Get Ready," Part II – "Get Set," and today Part III – "Go!"

At some point we need to discern God's will for our lives, both personally and collectively as the body of Christ. Discerning God's will for our lives is not just something we do occasionally, like when we make very big decisions, it's something that we do over and over again each and every day, and many times throughout the day! We are presented with choices all the time. We can either make choices that give us life – those that align with God's will for our lives as His people, or we can make choices that can lead to death – those that go against God's will for our lives as His people. It's as simple and as hard as that! While the big choices can have some pretty drastic consequences on our lives, all the many small choices can as well. It's often all the small choices that lead us in a certain direction.

The writer of our passage this morning from the Book of Deuteronomy, that whom is believed to have been Moses, was well aware of that.

I don't know about anybody else here, but speaking for myself, I have made some pretty bad choices in my life. Many choices that clearly went against the will of God and some of them had some pretty large consequences. Some that affected quite a few people, significantly. Fortunately we have a very patient and forgiving God.

The disciple Peter tells us in his 2nd letter that "God is patient with us, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). "Repentance," to change, to change the direction of the choices that we make. But the disciple Peter also tells us that God's patience with us does not last forever:

But the day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, and the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.

2 Peter 3:10 (NIV)

So for those of you who might be wondering, "why a series on Discernment?" Because ultimately the future of our eternal destinies depend on the choices which we make.

Ultimately we are held accountable for the personal choices which we make, and of course the biggest choice we make is whether or not we choose to accept Jesus Christ as the only one who can save us from our sins – "we confess with our mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in our heart that God raised him from the dead" (Romans 10:9), but we are also responsible for the choices we make collectively as Christ's body here on earth today.

And for those of us in leadership positions, we will be held even more accountable. I continue to be surprised by the number of leaders, including pastoral leaders, who want the responsibility of leadership but then struggle with the accountability. It's not even so much about being accountable to our peers, at the end we are going to be accountable to God.

Discerning God's will is all about helping us to make good choices. Good meaning they are pleasing to God.

"The Heart of the Discernment process is listening – listening to God, to each other and to what's going on in the depths of our own souls, where God's Spirit witnesses with our spirit about things that are true." Ruth Haley Barton, *Pursuing God's Will Together*, p. 203

Listening –

Listening to God through Scripture,
 Listening to God in Jesus, the fullest revelation of Himself (“the image of the invisible God”)
 Listening to the Holy Spirit at work in the world,
 Listening to the Holy Spirit in ourselves
 Listening to the Holy Spirit in others

“Listening to others”

We live in a culture where people are much more skilled at trying to get their point across and arguing their position, then they are at being able to actively listen to others and how the Holy Spirit may be speaking.

Ruth Haley Barton in her book *Pursuing God’s Will Together* offers us several guidelines for listening well. I have adapted them a little but much of the credit needs to go to her. They are on your outline this morning.

Guidelines for Listening Well:

1. Take the time to be still and to become settled in God’s presence -
“Where two or three come together in my name, there I am with them.”
 Matthew 18:20 (NIV)
2. Listen to others with your entire self (senses, feelings, and rational faculties).
3. Do not interrupt!
4. Pause between speakers to absorb what has been said.
5. Do not formulate what you want to say while someone else is speaking.
6. Speak for yourself, expressing your own thoughts and feelings, referring to your own experiences. Avoid being hypocritical. Steer away from making broad generalizations.
7. Listen to the group as a whole – to those who have spoken aloud as well as to those who haven’t. Often, as much is being said among those who are not saying anything as those who are speaking.
8. Leave space for anyone who may want to speak a first time before speaking a second time yourself.
9. Hold your desires and opinions – even your convictions – lightly. Be willing to be influenced by others whom you respect.
10. Remember that in our current human state no one has a perfect understanding of God’s will on every matter.

Paul writes in Romans 12:2-3 says;

Do not be conformed 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.

But in 1 Corinthians 13 he writes;

Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see fact to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known.

1 Cor. 13:12 (NIV)

When it comes to Discerning the Will of God Together, we first need to “Get Ready,” clarifying the question(s) being discerned; and then we need to “Get Set,” preparing our hearts, minds and souls for the discernment. Last week Alex talked about “Holy Indifference.” Every single one of us needs to ask ourselves the question, “I am indifferent to anything but the will of God?” when it comes to the question or questions being considered. And finally, we need to Go!

And even step three, should start in silence. Discernment requires both self-and other-awareness, as well as space for the Holy Spirit to work.

“Silence is an occasion for asking, “what needs to die in me in order for the will of God to come forth?”
Ruth Haley Barton (p.213)

We start in silence, inviting the Holy Spirit to be present and for God to speak to us. We listen to one another. We speak for ourselves and only for ourselves. And we listen. We listen to the others and we listen to what God might be saying for God often speaks to us today in the same still small voice that He spoke to Elijah – not in the whirlwind, the storms, the busyness of our lives.

Then we might need to go away, to be by ourselves and listen. It might be for a short time, ½ hour, 1 hour or it might be days, weeks or even longer. When it comes to making decisions, especially big decisions, the church usually errors in one of two ways: One being that we don’t make any decision. We put it off. We don’t like the conflict or the stress that it brings so we just don’t do it. The trouble with that is that a no decision eventually becomes a decision. The other way we error is that we often make decisions too hastily, without thinking about the long term consequences of our decisions, or making the decision regarding my agenda, or our agenda, versus God’s agenda. One of the Fruit of the Spirit is patience. When it comes to making big decisions in the church, or in our own lives, we need to be patient so we can make well informed decisions that accord with the will of God.

We listen to one another, then we might go away for a period of time, then we reconvene and we listen again. How has God been speaking to us in the time away – however long that time might have been?

Then we need to select an option, or the option, to what God is doing and that which is faithful and obedient to His Word – the written Word in Scripture and the living Word Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

Sometimes the best option or options is not always clear. When the way forward is not clear, we should select an option which is the best for this time and that which brings the most glory and honor to God. Even when it might not seem as clear as we would like it to be, can we at least get to the place where we can say, “To the best of our ability, we agree that this particular path is God’s will for us right here and right now, so this is the direction we will go?”

Then we need to “Seek inner Confirmation” –

Does the decision you/we are about to make feel right? Yes, we can be fooled by our feelings, feelings are often fleeting and we live in a time and culture where emotions and feelings seem to rule (that which needs to be a caution to us) but God gave us our emotions and feelings for a reason.

Last week Alex mentioned the name Ignatius of Loyola, and I don't really remember the exact context in which he talked about him but Ignatius, who lived in the 1500's, is the founder of the Jesuits, the Roman Catholic group also known as "The Society of Jesus" which uses the slogan "contemplation and action." Ignatius also developed what is known as "the spiritual exercises" which both Catholics and Protestants have engaged in. In his "spiritual exercises" Loyola focuses on Consolation and Desolation.

Consolation is the interior movement of our heart when the spirit within us aligns with God's Holy Spirit. It gives us a deep sense of life-giving connection with God, others and our authentic self.

Desolation occurs when our human spirit does not align with God's Spirit. It often results in the loss of a sense of God's presence. We feel out of touch with God, with others and our authentic self.

Originally, Adam & Eve in the Garden of Eden felt consolation, their spirits were in tune with God's Holy Spirit, they were walking in His ways, in His Will. But then they strayed, they committed the first sin which separated them from God, they went and hid because they were experiencing desolation.

The same is true in our own lives today. Have you ever really struggled with a decision – maybe taking a new job, or buying a car, or maybe even bigger a house and you found yourself going back and forth, is it God's will or is it more my own will, wanting it to be God's will, and very shortly after making the decision you had that bad feeling come over you suggesting that it might not have been God's will – that's desolation. Or on the flip side you had a good feeling and you sensed strongly God's hand upon the decision, well that's consolation.

That's really what Moses is talking about in our passage this morning from Deuteronomy. Choose life! The more we walk in God's ways, the ways He wants us to live, the more our spirit is aligned with His Spirit, the more we will experience consolation – life giving. That's true not just in our own lives but also in the life of the church. There's a reason why there is so much conflict and desolation in the world, in our nation and even in many churches.

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As Christians we are to walk in harmony with Jesus, the Son, who walked in harmony with God His Father. We experience consolation more often in our lives when we are making decisions which align with His will, His will which has been revealed to us through His Word, both the

Bible and fully revealed in Jesus, even if it goes against our own will and the will of the current culture and world.

Last week Alex used the Scripture of Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, trying to fulfill God's will for his life here on earth by going to the cross and dying for the sins of all humanity and finally Jesus prayed, "yet not my will, but your will be done" (Luke 22:42).

I have mentioned a number of times lately, I have come to the conclusion that very few things happen here on earth by chance. There are not too many mere coincidences. A couple days after Alex's message last Sunday focusing on that passage one of my devotions focused on that very same passage, entitled "Walking in Harmony with Jesus."

"The thing that marked the life of Jesus was His perfect submission to the will of the Father. Whether it was His acceptance of the cross at Gethsemane or His prayer for the church in John 17, we know that in all things Jesus was committed to His Father's kingdom purposes. It is not always easy to discern the perfect will of God; however, as we seek His heart and increase our knowledge of His Word, His Spirit will teach us. As we lay our hearts alongside God's plan in the smaller things of life, He will gradually teach us what to do in the larger, the more significant times. It brings great joy and peace to walk in harmony with the King of kings."

Connection! Devotions for Everyday Life, 6/21/2017

Closing Prayer:

Grant, O God, that we may wait patiently,
 as servants standing before their Lord,
 to listen and know your will:
 that we may welcome all truth,
 under whatsoever outward forms it may be uttered;
 that we may bless every good deed, by whomsoever it may be done;
 and that, rising about all strife and contention,
 we may contemplate your eternal truth and goodness,
 through Jesus Christ our Savior, Amen. Charles Kingsley (1819-1875)