

# Rethinking the Will of God

A New Look  
at an Old Subject

Frank Viola

# RETHINKING THE WILL OF GOD

**Frank Viola**

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## AUTHOR'S NOTE

The content of this book was given in the form of a spoken message that I delivered on December 11, 2005 in North Florida. For this reason, the style of the book reflects the spoken form.

The influences on this little volume are too numerous to list. For the last twenty-five years, countless books on “Knowing God’s Will” have passed through my hands. Some were written at a popular level; others were theological treatises. I have gleaned from a number of them. I’ve also opted to borrow the language of various theologians in describing the two main types of God’s will: Moral and Sovereign.

At bottom, this book is a synthesis of several conflicting positions on the subject of God’s will. Namely, the mystical (God’s will is known only to our spirit) and the reasonable (God’s will is revealed to our mind). More importantly, it is a discussion of how I have practically resolved the issue in my own walk with the Lord.

The last chapter was born out of the horrors of watching a number of Christian fellowships needlessly split. This chapter exposes what I believe to be the root and branches of many divisions in the Body and lays hold of Paul’s way of averting them.

Because the message in this book proved so liberating to those who first heard it, it seemed good to me to have it transcribed and make available to the larger Body of Christ. With that said, I would like to thank Bo Hartmann, Mike Biggerstaff, and Frank Valdez for their all-too kind assistance.

Frank Viola  
Gainesville, Florida  
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## **INTRODUCTION**

### **THE AGONY OVER GOD'S WILL**

*Brethren, do not be children in understanding; however, in malice be babes, but in understanding be mature. (1 Cor. 14:20, NKJV)*

The following story is a conglomeration of several real stories of real people put into one fictitious character.

Enter Jack Jones. He's a twenty-two year old college student who has just finished his undergraduate degree at the University of Florida.

Jack has just become a Christian. His conversion was dramatic. It was one of those conversions that utterly changed his life and turned him upside down. Jack is completely devoted to Jesus Christ.

Jack begins attending a church in town. The pastor of his church is giving a series of sermons entitled, How to Know the Perfect Will of God for Your Life. Jack is present every Sunday morning taking copious notes on every word. Here's what the pastor is teaching:

God has an individual will for every individual believer. He has a detailed blueprint . . . a comprehensive road map for your life. It's like a train track. Each track represents every decision you will ever make.

The wonderful thing is that God has promised to make His perfect will known to every believer. As a Christian, you have two main responsibilities. One is to discover God's perfect will for your life. The other is to follow it.

If you follow it, you will have joy and peace in your life. If you miss it, you are outside of God's will, and that's not a good place to be. The way that you know God's perfect will is by

reading the Bible. But there are many decisions that you will face that are not addressed in the Bible.

In those cases you must look for outward signs and interpret those signs. These signs are like road signs on the highway of life. These signs will point you in the direction of God's will. The Lord will also lead you by inward impressions. By these two things you will know the perfect will of God for every decision you face.

Jack is thrilled by the pastor's teaching. So he launches off and begins to lay before God some of his personal decisions.

Jack just graduated from college, and he's always desired to get his Masters degree. The University of Florida does not offer a Masters program for Jack's major, so he must enroll in another school. Just before becoming a Christian, two schools accepted Jack into their Masters program. Florida State University and the University of South Florida. But now after being introduced to "the perfect will of God," Jack feels compelled to bring the decision before God.

And so he prays. "Lord," Jack reverently asks, "Which school do you want me to attend? Both have accepted me." Jack spends several days praying and asking the Lord to show him what His will is in the matter. The days go by.

Jack is seeking inward impressions. He's reading his Bible. He's looking for signs. Several weeks pass, and Jack is not sure which option to take. God has not revealed anything to him. He feels the pressure because the deadline is approaching his door. Jack must make a decision quickly. But he's frustrated because God has not revealed His will.

Under the pressure of time, Jack ends up deciding on Florida State. But with that decision comes fear and guilt. He is afraid that he may have missed God's will. He feels guilty because he believes that if he were more spiritual, the Lord would have shown him His will in this decision . . . just like He shows His will to all the other Christians in his church who give testimonies every Sunday about God's direct leading in their lives.

Jack feels like there's something wrong with him. He must be disobeying God in some way. God must not be happy with him for some reason. Jack is unsettled about his choice. But he doesn't know what else to do about it.

In his first year at Florida State, Jack gets involved with an on-campus Christian organization where he meets a young lady. He is very fond of her, and she's very fond of him. Her name is Sarah, and she and Jack spend a lot of time together. The more he gets to know Sarah, the more he likes her.

Sarah has everything that Jack has been looking for in a girl ever since he was a teen. She's very intelligent. She has sharp wit and a great sense of humor. She has a good head on her shoulders, and she's strikingly attractive. What is more, she is a Christian who is deeply committed to the Lord. Sarah and Jack have many of the same interests, and they are the best of friends.

Jack begins bringing her to the Lord to see if it is God's will for him to pursue a relationship with her. Since the Bible doesn't tell him whether or not to date Sarah, he begins looking for inward impressions and outward signs.

On his way to school one day, Jack turns on the radio. He tunes into a Christian radio station and hears a preacher talk about how God will often demand us to let go of the things that we love.

Immediately Jack thinks, "Maybe God is talking to me! Maybe this is a sign from Him." A few days later, Jack is flipping through the TV channels late at night, and he stumbles upon a television evangelist. The evangelist is delivering a sermon on how God doesn't always give us the desires of our heart. And we must be willing to accept His will when it crosses our desires.

Troubled by this sermon, Jack falls asleep thinking that God may be telling him to not pursue Sarah. That very night, Jack has an interesting dream. He dreams that Sarah is no longer interested in him. In the dream, he is married to a young woman named Jill who is part of his church. (Jack barely knows Jill.) The next morning, Jack thinks to himself, "God

probably doesn't want me to be with Sarah. That would be just too good. Sarah has got everything I want. The Lord's way is hard. It's the way of suffering and the cross. I think the Lord's will is that I get to know Jill."

On the heels of this dream, Jack begins spending less and less time with Sarah. And he begins making attempts at getting to know Jill.

Interestingly, Jack is not attracted to Jill at all. But he figures that if it's God's will for him to marry her—as the dream seemed to indicate—he will eventually fall in love with her.

The weeks go by. The months go by. Jack finds it quite difficult to get to know Jill, though he is trying. She often drives home on weekends, which is a two-hour drive. And she often misses church . . . the main place where Jack talks to her.

Six months go by, and Jack hardly ever talks to Sarah anymore. She no longer attends the Christian organization where Jack met her, and he rarely bumps into her at school. They've gone their separate ways.

Jack finally spends some quality time with Jill. But he still has no physical attraction to her.

As this is happening, another drama unfolds. Jack's uncle Sam is a wealthy businessman. In fact, he's a multi-millionaire. Sam has a reputation of always making sharp decisions in business adventures. That's how he made his money.

Sam approaches his young nephew saying, "I've got a great opportunity for you, Jack. There's little risk to you. You can't lose anything significant. But if you join with me in this new business adventure I've undertaken, you very well could make enough money within a year to pay off your entire school debt. You've got two weeks to decide on it."

As is his custom, Jack brings this job opportunity to God immediately. He waits on the Lord's guidance and even fasts an entire day to get His will on this matter. Two weeks go by, and Jack has not received any direction at all. He has no inward impression, and there have been no outward signs. He is just as unclear as he was when he was first approached by his uncle.

Sam calls and asks Jack about his decision. Jack tells him, “Uncle Sam, I have to be honest with you. I’m a Christian now, and I submit all of my decisions to God’s will. He has not shown me anything on this so I’m going to have to pass.” Sam accepts the decision. Jack continues his studies at school.

It has been nine months since he first met Sarah. And this is what has happened. He discovers that Sarah is now engaged. His heart drops when he finds this out. To make matters worse, he learns that Jill is not even a Christian! And she has just reunited with her old high school boyfriend who lives in her home town. (Part of Jack feels relieved by this news because he was never attracted to her.)

But here is the clincher. Jack’s father calls and says, “This is going to hurt, son. But I do think you need to know. Your Uncle has made \$70,000 over the last month. Half of that money would have been given to you if you would have gone into business with him.”

Jack is stunned. He’s confused. He begins to battle two conflicting thoughts. One is that God doesn’t really care about him. The other is that he may not really be a Christian after all. He begins questioning his entire relationship with God.

What his pastor taught him just doesn’t seem to be working in his life. It seems to work for others, but not for Jack. He has spent many nights agonizing over God’s perfect will for his life. And he has lived almost daily with the haunting question, “Am I in the center of God’s will, or have I missed it?”

In short, Jack sinks into depression.

A week passes. One day while driving to the supermarket, Jack flips through the channels on his car radio. He is suddenly arrested by a preacher who is delivering a message. The message is about discovering the will of God. Jack ends up listening to the message for twenty minutes. The effect?

It profoundly rocks his world!

When the message is over, Jack parks his car off the side of the road. He takes his hands off the wheel and leans back in his seat. He is astounded. With mouth slightly open, Jack feels as though 3,000 lbs. have just been lifted from his shoulders. In

quick reverse, his mind begins to replay the last nine months of his life. Everything suddenly becomes clear. Jack's eyes begin to tear up as he mutters under his breath, "I understand now. You really do love me, Lord."

Jack has just been given a brand new view of God's will. And that view has utterly and completely set him free. His life will never be the same.

Now why did I tell you that story? For one reason.

It is because that which Jack heard that day is the very message I wish to share with you now.

# CHAPTER 1

## GETTING STUCK ON A TRAIN TRACK

I would like to take dead aim at a doctrine that is very popular among Christians today. It is the doctrine that teaches that God has a wonderful, detailed plan for your life. He has a perfect will for every individual Christian that encompasses every decision they will ever make.

That perfect will is like a train track. If you miss God's perfect will, you are going to end up in a really bad place. The way that you discover God's will is by reading your Bible, following inward impressions (usually in the form of "checks" or "stirrings"), and decoding outward signs.

I challenge this idea on several counts.

### **The Doctrine is Not Biblical**

First of all, you cannot find Biblical support for this doctrine. The idea that God has a unique, detailed, prescribed plan for every individual believer does not exist in Scripture.

The phrase, the will of God, is used in four different senses throughout the Bible. They are as follows (see the Appendix for Scripture references):

*1. God's Eternal Will.* This is God's central, all-consuming and all-governing will. It is His central goal and ultimate intention. It is that which governs all of His activities. Paul refers to it as the eternal purpose (Eph. 3:11). God has a single will that drives Him to do everything that He does. It's the ultimate goal of creation and redemption. It is the one will that stands behind the universe.

God hid His will for ages. He shrouded it in a mystery, and He hid it in His Son. The Almighty chose not to reveal it to any creature, including His holy angels. Instead, the Lord in His good mercies waited. He waited for ages. And what did He

wait for? He waited until a unique vessel was born whom He would grant the unique privilege to know and live in the divulged secret of His own heart. That vessel is the church, and it includes you and me!

The very mystery of the ages . . . His eternal purpose . . . His ultimate plan . . . “the mystery of His will” was given to Paul of Tarsus to discharge to God’s people in this age! What a tremendous privilege and honor that we as Christians have. We have been given the privilege both to know and live in the mystery of creation and the will behind it all. (For a detailed discussion on the eternal purpose, see my book *Rethinking the Wineskin*, Chapter 7.)

2. *God’s Sovereign Will*. This is also called God’s “permissive will.” This will is hidden from man. Whatever God does or allows is His sovereign will. God is omnipotent, meaning, He is all-powerful. He can do anything that is capable of being done. But God is also omniscient, meaning, He’s all-knowing. He knows everything before, during, and after it happens.

So let’s go back to eternity past. Our all-knowing God sees into the future before He creates the universe. Every event unfolds before His eyes. He sees every act that every human being will ever commit. He is also all-powerful, which means He can change anything He sees before it happens.

So if I lose a button from my shirt tomorrow, God saw it in eternity past. But He also had the power to change this event before it happened. Consequently, because God is omniscient (He knows all things, including future events) and He is omnipotent (He can change what He sees), then the loss of my button was His sovereign will.

God’s omniscience coupled with His omnipotence means that He predetermines everything that happens. This is His sovereign or permissive will. Did you follow that?

How can you know the sovereign will of God? You can know slices of it only if He reveals it to you supernaturally. Otherwise, read a history book! If the history book is accurate, you have just discovered the sovereign will of God in the past.

So God is sovereign. If something happens, it is His will because He saw it and allowed it.

3. *God's Moral Will.* This is also called God's "perfect will." It is His desired will as it pertains to man's behavior. While God's sovereign will is hidden from us, His moral will is revealed. God's moral will relates to how He wishes for human beings to conduct themselves. His moral will applies to every person in the same way. For instance, the Scripture says that God is not willing that anyone should perish, but that all would receive eternal life. God's moral and perfect will is that all people come to His Son. But His sovereign or permissive will allows them to reject Him.

4. *God's Will in Dispensing His Gifts and Callings in His Church.* Because Jesus Christ is Head of His church, He has willed the place that the members of His Body will occupy. The Lord distributes His callings and gifts to the members of His Body according to His will. Because each believer is a different member of His Body (some are hands, some are feet, etc.—1 Cor. 12), His will concerning gifts and callings differs from person to person. For this reason, Paul would often say that he was "an apostle according to the will of God."

Not every Christian has the same gift or calling. Each member of the Body is given a different calling and gift according to God's will. Further, the Lord will often direct His servants with respect to His work. A very large part of the Spirit's leading in the life of Jesus and the apostles (Paul included) was on this score. It had to do with ministry.

These are the four uses of the phrase will of God in the Scriptures. I challenge you to look at the Scriptures in the Appendix. If you read each of them in context, you will discover that the phrase the will of God never refers to a specific, individual plan that differs from Christian to Christian. To put it another way, the doctrine that God has a detailed plan for your life which encompasses every decision you will ever make has no Biblical basis.

## **The Doctrine is Unlivable**

This doctrine is also unlivable. While it can be believed and taught, it simply cannot be lived out. I have yet to meet a person who actually lives this teaching. May I call to witness the events of your life this morning.

Upon waking, you decided if you were going to get out of bed or snooze. You may have decided what you would do while lying in bed. You then decided which side of the bed you would throw your legs over.

You then decided what you would do as soon as you got out of bed. Maybe it was to go into the bathroom and brush your teeth. Maybe it was to take a shower or a bath. Maybe it was to walk into another room and fellowship with the Lord. You made some decision. If you took a shower, you decided whether or not to shampoo your hair . . . whether or not to shave. You then decided what side of your body you would wash first.

You then decided when you would get dressed. And in so doing, you decided what to wear. You also decided which sock to put on first . . . if indeed you chose to wear socks. You then decided which shoes to wear. And in so doing, you decided which shoe to put on first.

Then you decided whether or not to eat breakfast. If you did eat, you decided where you would eat, what you would eat, and how you would prepare the food. If you went out to eat, you decided where you would go, what seat you sat in, what you would order, and how you would order it. You decided exactly how much to tip the waitress or waiter.

Point: You made countless decisions this morning.

Now, I would like to propose that none of you asked the Lord to show you His will for every decision that I just mentioned. And if you tell me, “Brother Frank, the Lord guided me on every decision you just stated . . . I’ve consulted God about His will before I made every one of those decisions, and the Spirit led me into which choice to make for all of them,” then I have but one response for you.

You need to be admitted to the skull ranch immediately because your head is not screwed on straight. In addition, you have a problem telling the truth. My point is that this doctrine is simply not livable.

### **The Doctrine Encourages Immaturity**

I grew up with the train track view of God's will for most of my Christian life. My observation is that it encourages gross immaturity. I've watched many Christian brothers and sisters who followed this doctrine make some of the most foolish and bizarre decisions. I could hear some of them now.

“Brother Frank, I was outside sitting in the sun, contemplating a decision before God. And then, lo and behold, I saw a twig move, and I knew that God was giving me a sign to do thus and so.”

The belief that God has an individual will for your life that you must discover has also caused many Christians to put out fleeces. I've been guilty of this myself in the past. I soon discovered that this is not a New Covenant practice. In fact, it only happened once in the Old Testament. And the conditions were drastically different from the way that Christians utilize the fleece today. (If you don't know what “putting out a fleece” is, read Judges 6.)

Casting lots (which was never practiced after the Holy Spirit descended at Pentecost), playing “Bible Roulette” (flipping the pages, stopping, and randomly sticking your finger on a sentence to discover God's will for your life) are all very immature and foolish ways of trying to ascertain the will of God in a decision.

In short, I've watched Christians make some of the dumbest mistakes in their lives by trying to interpret inward impressions and decode outward signs. And I will shamelessly admit that I have been guilty of this as well.

### **The Doctrine Engenders False Guilt, Fear, Doubt, and Confusion**

The train track view engenders false guilt, fear, doubt, and confusion when God's will is not clearly known. I have met

many a Christian who suffered from a chronic hangover of guilt because they felt that they missed God's will in making a personal decision.

Jack was dominated with guilt because he couldn't discover God's will about which college to attend. This doctrine breeds false guilt that one is not spiritual enough to receive clear guidance on every decision. It produces fear that one may have missed the will of God. It creates confusion when one thinks they received a sign or inward impression, only to find out later that the particular sign or impression didn't come from God at all. This doctrine also spawns doubt in God's love and His promise to provide for and take care of His children.

Regrettably, I have watched some Christians shipwreck their faith over this issue. I've watched them agonize to the point that they question their salvation. They conclude that if they were saved, God would supernaturally show them what they were to do in every circumstance.

Now I want you to get clear on something. I'm going to speak a little about sin in an effort to set many of you free from false guilt. According to the New Testament, sin is the transgression of the Law (1 John 3:4). If you violate God's Law, you have sinned. What saith God's Law? "Thou shall not steal." If I steal your lunch box, I have committed a sin. The Lord Jesus Christ told us that the entire Law . . . all 613 rules . . . is covered by one precept (Matt. 7:12; 22:36-40). Paul also echoes the Lord and so does James (Rom. 13:8-10; James 2:8). John speaks right in line with it as well (1 John 1-5).

The Lord said that love fulfills the whole Law. It fulfills all of it. What is love? Love is the very nature of God. Our God, in His essence, is love. Love is benefiting others at the expense of oneself. The greatest demonstration of love is the cross of our Lord.

Love fulfills all of God's demands. Now, sin is the transgression of the Law. Consequently, if you walk in love, you cannot sin. Why? Because love fulfills the Law. If I love you, I'm not going to steal from you. If I love you, I'm not going to kill you. If I love you, I'm not going to commit

adultery with your spouse. If I love you, I'm not going to covet what you own. If I love you, I'm not going to lose my temper and cuss you out. If I love you, I'm not going to lie to you, deceive you, belittle you, demean you, or insult you. Love fulfills the Law.

Parenthetically, if I am faced with a clear opportunity to love you . . . when I can meet a known need of yours, and I deliberately and knowingly refuse, I have also sinned. This is the teaching of James (James 4:17).

Having that as a background, what I'm about to say should liberate many of you. If you are ignorant about God's will regarding a certain decision, and you are not out of harmony with love with respect to that particular decision, then you cannot sin in that decision!

If you are not violating love at any point with respect to a decision, then you have not sinned. Put differently, if your motive, your intention, your goal, your action, your reaction, and your attitude in a given decision are not in violation with love, then you have not sinned in that decision.

Now, you may make a foolish decision. You may make a stupid decision. You may make a decision that you will regret for many years. But if you have not violated love in making that decision, then you have not sinned in making it. You can only sin if you walk out of love. And that can penetrate to your motives, your attitudes, and the means to the end.

Are you following what I'm trying to say here? If you have, you should feel a whole lot lighter right now. I'm trying to free your mind from the concept that says that if you make a decision and God has not given you a revelation on what His will is in that decision, then you have somehow sinned. This is simply not true.

## **The Doctrine is Inconsistent with God's Relationship to His People**

The train track view of God's will is inconsistent with God's relationship to us. Let me unravel that a bit.

How does a shepherd lead his sheep? He leads them into those areas where they will be safe from harm. And when he leads the sheep into areas of danger, he stays with them very closely.

When a shepherd leads his sheep into green pastures, he gives them boundaries. By his rod, he will specify where the sheep are not to migrate toward, lest they get picked off by wolves. The rod brings the sheep back if they stray.

But the shepherd does not point out specific plots of grass in the pasture that each sheep must eat from. Instead, he gives the sheep a wide boundary of pasture land. As long as the sheep are within the safe boundary outlined by the shepherd, they can graze on any patch of grass that they choose. The heavenly Shepherd does the same with His sheep.

This principle is also true for earthly kings. A king gives basic laws to his people to promote harmony in his kingdom. He doesn't give prescribed, detailed rules that govern every decision the people in his nation will make. He gives them broad laws to follow; not specific instructions for day-to-day living. The same is true with our Heavenly King.

Equally so, a wise father will give his children lots of instruction when they are very young. He will supervise virtually everything that the child does. But he has a goal in mind. The wise father is trying to train his child so that the child will eventually be able to make decisions for himself.

As the child grows and matures, the parental supervision becomes less and less and the child's freedom to decide on his own becomes greater and greater. So does the child's responsibility.

Consequently, if the parents have done well in training their children, the children will be able to make judgments according to the parental training that was instilled in them. They will be trained to make good, wise decisions. They will be capable of making solid judgments based upon the training they received. It is the same way with our Heavenly Father. Are you following the metaphors here?

The Lord leads His children as a Shepherd, a King, and a Father. As a Shepherd, He leads us into green pastures and out of danger. But He allows great freedom of choice within the green pastures. As a King, He gives His people spiritual principles by which to govern their lives. But these principles are very broad and allow for much freedom of choice. As a Father, He provides lots of instruction to His children when they are young. But then He expects them to mature. And part of maturity is the ability to make decisions that are in harmony with God's mind and heart.

### **The Crucial Need for Understanding**

Psalm 32:8-9 underscores the point I'm trying to make. The Lord says through the Psalmist,

I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will guide you with my eye. Do not be like the horse or like the mule, which have no understanding, which must be harnessed with bit and bridle, else they will not come near you. (NKJV)

The horse and the mule have no understanding. They have no discernment. They have no judgment. Because they have no understanding, they must be pulled with the bit and the bridle, left and right, and told where to go in every circumstance. The Lord tells His people, "I will teach you which way to go. Don't be like the horse and mule which have no understanding."

There is a great need for understanding among the Lord's people today. Scores of Christians have imbibed a doctrine that essentially throws out the element of understanding and reduces them to that of a horse or mule where they expect God to pull them to the left and to the right saying, "Go here; go there. Go here; go there. This is what you do in this situation. This is what you don't do in this situation."

And the Lord says to His people, "Do not be like that."

The point of the passage is simply this: God teaches, instructs, and guides us by giving us understanding. Therefore, seek understanding. And that brings us to the passage that we opened with:

Brethren, do not be children in understanding; however, in malice be babes, but in understanding mature. (1 Cor. 14:20, NKJV)

I would like to close this chapter by making the following proposition: God's will for you and me is not like a train track. It's like a parking lot.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **FINDING LIBERTY IN A PARKING LOT**

Imagine a public parking lot, would you? Notice that a parking lot has boundaries. We know by the boundaries where the parking lot begins and where it ends. We know what is inside the parking lot and what is outside of it.

The beauty of the parking lot is the freedom it displays. There are many choices within the parking lot. The drivers may freely choose between many parking spaces. So long as a parking space is not taken, nor reserved for specialized individuals, drivers may freely select the space in which they wish to park their car.

Certainly, some choices may be wiser than others. If it is raining, it's probably wiser and more advantageous to park in a space that is closer to the building than one that is far removed from it. On the other hand, many parking spaces are equally expedient. One is no better than the other.

I want to probe the subject of God's will a little deeper by considering the very first command that God gave to man. This is the first time that God revealed His will to a human being. And I believe it is loaded with insight.

#### **A Visit to a Certain Garden**

Go with me to a certain garden. The Lord has just put His man into the beautiful garden of Eden. And He says the following to Adam:

Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die. (Genesis 2:16-17, NKJV)

Now let's look closely at this command. The Lord says, "You may eat freely from every tree in the garden. The

exception is the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.” In other words, “Adam, you may freely choose to eat from every tree in this garden. Just keep away from this one particular tree.”

I see a parking lot here. To keep with the metaphor, I hear God saying, “You may park your car in any space in this lot. Just stay within the boundaries of the parking lot. If you park outside the boundary, it will mean trouble for you. Every tree in the garden is within the parking lot. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil is outside the lot.”

With that thought in mind, let us move on with the story.

God opens Adam’s side, and Eve makes her debut. Adam, being the responsible husband that he is, instructs his dear wife on God’s commandment about the trees. Eve nods her head and says, “No problemo. Got it, Honey-Bunny.”

As the day progresses, Adam says to his lovely wife, “Eve, Sweetheart, I’m really hungry right now. I’m the father of the male species, therefore, I don’t have the first clue about how to prepare a meal. Would you mind preparing something for us to eat this evening? I want to tend to this garden a little while longer.”

Eve replies, “Sure, Cupcake.”

As Eve beholds the forest of trees that fill her horizon, she is overwhelmed with the different types. She pulls some apples from one tree. Some pears from another. Some oranges from another. And some peaches from another.

Twenty minutes go by, and she calls for her husband. “Love-Angel, would you come over here please? I’ve got a question.”

“Yes, dear,” Adam replies.

Eve continues, “I don’t know which one of these fruits I should prepare for the meal. Can you ask God which one I should use? I don’t want to mess up and miss His will on this first decision that I’m going to make.”

Adam says, “Fine, Darling.”

Adam gets alone and lifts his eyes to the heavens and says, “Lord, the wife that you gave me says that she doesn’t know which fruit to use to prepare a meal for us.”

Heaven is silent. Adam repeats the question. But still, there is only silence.

After waiting fifteen minutes, Adam returns to Eve saying, “The Lord didn’t respond to me, Honey-Buns. I went back over the commandment He gave me, and I guess you can pick whatever fruits you like so long as they didn’t come from the forbidden tree.”

Eve shrugs her shoulders and decides to use the peaches. Ten minutes pass and she calls for Adam again, “Sweetie-weety, I’ve got another question. How am I to prepare these peaches? I mean, should I peel them or leave them the way they are? Should I slice them, dice them, quarter them, bake them, make a pie out of them, make peach cobbler, mashed peaches, peach-bread, or a peach smoothie? Can you please ask God how I’m suppose to do this?”

Adam retorts, “All right, fine. But I doubt He’ll answer me.” Adam retreats to a place alone and beckons the Lord to answer his wife’s question.

For the second time, Adam meets the silence of God. Suddenly, a thought arises in Adam’s unfallen mind. He thinks to himself, God is not answering me because I already know the answer!

Let that statement marinate for a moment.

Adam returns to Eve and says, “Listen, Pumpkin. God isn’t answering me. I believe it’s because we already know the answer. It’s your choice. The Lord said we may freely eat from any tree in the garden except for the forbidden tree. So long as we don’t eat from the forbidden tree, you may prepare these fruits any way that you like.”

Now there’s a point in this imaginative story. God’s will is like a parking lot. You can miss God’s will by being outside of the parking lot. But as long as you are in the parking lot, then you may freely choose any parking space you wish. Put another way, you cannot miss His will in the parking lot!

The parking lot represents God's moral will. In the garden scene, God's moral will was to eat from any tree in the garden except for the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Beyond that, which tree to eat from, how to eat, when to eat, and how to prepare the fruit was left to the choice of the first man and the first woman.

Take a deep breath now, and let that sink in.

This raises a crucial question. How do we as believers discover the moral will of God? How do we determine the boundaries of the parking lot?

There is a subjective way and an objective way. Let's first explore the subjective way.

### **An Inward Discovery**

In the Old Testament, God gave His people a very detailed map of His moral will for them. Israel had 613 laws by which to govern their lives. Old Testament Israel was commanded to carry out specific behaviors like what clothes to wear and not wear, what kinds of food to eat and not eat, and how to build their houses.

Thankfully, those laws were nailed to the cross of Jesus Christ (Col. 2:14ff). In place of the Old Covenant, which has been done away with, we have been given a New Covenant that is far better (Heb. 8-10). Under the New Covenant, the Law of God died in Christ (Rom. 7:1-6; 10:4; Gal. 2:19; 3:10-25). However, when Jesus rose again from the dead, He became a life-giving spirit, and He took up residence in each one of us (1 Cor. 15:45; Rom. 8). Christ is the fulfillment of the moral will of God. Christ, through the Holy Spirit, is the living, breathing, personified will of God.

To put it another way, God's moral will now lives inside of us as a Person. He has come in the Spirit, and the Spirit dwells in us. Thus, all the passages in the New Testament about "being led by the Spirit" refer to being led into the moral will of God. (The context of passages like Romans 8 and Galatians 5 make this clear.) Practically speaking, the Spirit of God leads us into the boundaries of the parking lot.

As Christians, you and I are no longer under the Old Covenant law where we try to discover the rules of God in the Bible and then do our best to carry them out. That is Old Covenant living. You and I have something far better. The book of Hebrews makes very clear that God has done away with Old Covenant living and has given us a new and better covenant by which to live (Heb. 8-10).

The promise of the New Covenant is that God has put His laws in the minds of His people, and He has written them on their hearts (2 Cor. 3:2-3). Under the New Covenant, the will of God has become something internal and living.

We can say it this way. The Christian faith is not a moral religion as was Judaism. As Christians, we are outside the realm of rules and laws. The Christian walk is a Person. We are driven by a life form that is not our own. That life form is Divine.

This is not just a doctrine or a theology. God Himself has taken up residency in our very being. He lives inside of us. We have an indwelling Lord who moves, speaks, and leads within us. This is the same God who walked throughout Galilee in the first century. His name is Jesus, and He lives in us by the Holy Spirit.

Put differently, we have God's very life dwelling inside of us. And that life has a nature. Do you remember what that nature is?

It is love.

God is love. Love is what governs everything God does. You and I have a Lord who lives in us, and His driving nature is love. That nature seeks to benefit others at the expense of ourselves.

Following the leadership of the indwelling Spirit is a vast topic. We can write an entire book on the subject. But I would like to say a few basic things about it that I trust will be useful to you.

God's moral law has been written in your heart and mind. The Holy Spirit dwells in your innermost being. Therefore,

there are spiritual impulses, promptings, and instincts that function inside of you.

The more you get to know the Lord, the more you will intuitively know if a decision is inside or outside of His moral will. Because God is love and love fulfills His will, those inward registrations, promptings, and instincts will always lead you in the way of love. Paul told the Thessalonian Christians, “You don’t need anyone to teach you how to love. For you have been taught by God to love” (1 Thess. 4:9). In like manner, John says the anointing (the indwelling Spirit) teaches us how to walk in love and righteousness. Thus we don’t need anyone to teach us how to walk this way (1 John. 2:27ff.).

What I’m about to say is a common experience for all Christians. You get into an argument with someone very close to you. Perhaps some cutting word comes out of your mouth. Instantly, within your inward parts you feel uncomfortable and convicted. That is the indwelling Spirit—the anointing—revealing to you that you have just stepped outside of the parking lot.

You may be going about your business, and a person comes to your mind, and instinctively, you know you are to call them, reach out to them, or pray for them. Or someone asks you for a favor, and while your natural inclination is to turn them down due to the inconvenience, you have an instinct and a prompting to say “yes.” Or perhaps you are going head-to-head with someone over an issue that you feel passionate about. And intuitively, you are prompted to defer to the other person, drop the issue entirely, and put it into the Lord’s hands. Or a brother or sister in Christ gives you a personal observation, suggestion, or word of instruction, and it stays with you day after day. You have an inward witness that the word is right on the mark.

I remember as a young Christian in my teens what happened when I first began to ask the Lord to lead me by His Spirit. Some of the first promptings I had were to help my mother wash the dishes (something I hated to do). In responding to those promptings, I had joy in doing the dishes. The burden was not heavy.

I also remember times of mowing my lawn and then having an instinct to mow my neighbor's lawn right afterward. Again, I enjoyed doing it. One of the marks of the Lord's inward working is that when He prompts us to a certain action and we respond to it, He supplies the power to carry it out. Further, our inward parts are given a sense of life and peace.

The inward promptings that I received as a young believer always involved giving, aiding, and loving on the one hand, or losing and self-sacrificing on the other. Even in my life today, the leadership of the Holy Spirit virtually always involves one of two things: Serving and ministering to others or exposing some inward attitude, motive, reaction, or outlook in me that God wants to deal with. The method by which the Spirit leads is always toward a greater discovery of Christ.

Sometimes these promptings will cause one to perceive things outside of natural means in order to help someone spiritually, emotionally, or physically. I will give you a very recent example to illustrate this. A relative of mine was suffering from a severe cold. She told me that she was going to take some medicine. For reasons that I cannot explain, I felt inclined to watch her take the medicine to make sure the dosage was correct.

Again, there was no natural reason for me having this inclination. I've never checked on someone's medicine dosage before, and I had no good reason to do it this time. The directions said to take two tablespoons of the medicine. A measuring cup was included with the medicine bottle. The medicine was poured to the two-tablespoon mark. As I looked at it, I knew it was far more than two tablespoons. We then measured it, and sure enough, it was four tablespoons! The measuring cup was not accurate.

If I had not been there to check on the dosage, my loved one would have overdosed on the medicine. I was simply following an instinct I had. And there was no harm in doing so. A sensitive spirit can often perceive things outside of natural means.

As I look at the New Testament carefully, I discover the same principle. Whenever you find the leading of the Spirit in the life of Jesus (in the Gospels) or the apostles (in the book of Acts), it is virtually always in relation to walking in the righteousness of Christ or in ministering to others. To be led intuitively is the normal way that God leads His children into His moral will.

### **An Outward Guide**

There is also an objective discovery of God's moral will. The Scriptures, which are inspired by the same Spirit who indwells us, is an objective witness to God's moral will (2 Tim. 3:16). However, the Scriptures are not isolated in and of themselves.

The Scriptures contain what the New Testament authors call "the Word of God." The Word of God is Jesus Christ. He is the living Word. He is the Logos, the speech and utterance of God Himself. The Scriptures contain God's Word, and they reveal the Person of Christ (John 5:39). Therefore, the Scriptures are the written Word pointing to and revealing the living Word, Christ.

The New Testament refers to "the ministry of the Word" (Acts 6:4). This is the ministry where the Word of God is spoken, preached, or taught (Acts 18:11; 1 Thess. 2:13; Heb. 13:7). It is also called "the apostles' teaching" (Acts 2:42). Their teaching was a person . . . it was Christ.

The Scriptures are a witness to the moral will of God. The Old Testament reveals the will of God as it finds its fulfillment in Christ. The Gospels contain a record of how the indwelling life of God was lived out in Jesus of Nazareth. The book of Acts contains a record of how the indwelling life of God was lived out by the apostles and the early church. And the New Testament epistles reveal the Person of Christ to churches and individuals who are in crises. All are inspired by the same Spirit who indwells every Christian today. This is why Paul's letters are called "Scripture" (2 Pet. 3:15-16).

It is by the ministry of the Word of God that we are educated objectively in God's moral will, which is embodied in Jesus Christ. For this reason, Hebrews 4:12 tells us that the Word of God is alive, active, and can discern thoughts and intents. It also judges between what comes from our renewed inner man versus what comes from our fallen nature ("piercing even to the division of soul and spirit").

The ministry of the Word is essential to discovering the will of God for this one reason: It renews the mind and heightens our sensitivity to our indwelling Lord. It is also spirit and life . . . or food . . . to our inward man (John 6:63). The Word gets us familiar with the way in which our Lord operates. For His indwelling in us is no different from His living on earth and in the heavenlies. For it is the same life and the same Person.

Put another way, the life of the Lord in you—the subjective leading of the Lord into God's moral will—will never contradict the written Word of God. It will never contradict the revelation of Christ that is revealed in the Scriptures. It will always be in harmony with it.

I remember years ago meeting a woman who was following a certain "prophet." This prophet had very impressive gifts of the word of knowledge, predictive prophecy, and healing. The woman was married. The prophet told her that God showed him that she had married the wrong man. He said she was to divorce her husband (not officially, but "before God") and marry him (not officially, but "before God"). The woman believed the prophet and followed his leading.

Now, he was a "prophet." He had signs and wonders following him. God gave this revelation to him. The indwelling Spirit revealed this to him. Do you believe that? If you say "no," how do you know you are right? How do you know that God didn't tell him this?

We know on two counts. One, the life of Jesus Christ inside of you will tell you that such a word could not come from God. Why? Because it violates the way of love. This woman's husband suffered untold agony over this. If you are in touch with your spiritual instincts, you know that this prophet's

“revelation” could not come from Christ, for He is Love. Only pain, chaos, and deep hurt could come out of such a revelation if acted upon.

Two, the Scriptures condemn such a practice. The record of God’s life in Jesus the Son of God while on earth condemns it. His teachings, which are “spirit and life,” condemn it. The testimony of Paul of Tarsus, whose writings Peter calls “Scripture,” condemns it.

Let me press the point: When it comes to discovering God’s moral will, both the internal witness of the Spirit and the outward testimony of Scripture will always go hand in hand. That’s a lesson you ought never to forget.

Further, the Scripture discloses to us God’s ultimate intention or eternal will. It reveals to us what Paul called “the whole counsel of God” (Acts 20:27). In the Greek, the word “counsel” in this passage means “purpose.”

Knowledge of God’s eternal purpose—His central aim—is like a large compass that always points us in the direction of the Lord’s will. It is a frame of reference for Christian living. For God’s moral will is always in line with His eternal purpose.

It is no accident that Ephesians has more references to the will of God than any other New Testament letter (Eph. 1:1, 5, 9, 11; 5:17; 6:6). The governing theme of Ephesians is the eternal purpose of God. Understanding God’s purpose, then, goes a long way in providing direction for our lives.

## **Sharpening Your Spiritual Instincts**

There are three passages in the New Testament that shed light on the discovery of God’s moral will. When I walk through these texts, I find very practical instruction on the matter. The first one is Romans 12:1-2:

I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. (NKJV)

Paul writes to the church in Rome and exhorts the believers to offer their bodies to God as a living sacrifice. Herein lies an important spiritual principle. The Lord does not reveal His will to those who are unwilling to follow it. Jesus said, “If any man will [is willing to] do His will, He shall know . . .” (John 7:17). “If your eye is single [you have single devotion to the Lord], your whole body will be full of light” (Matt. 6:22).

Paul goes on to discuss the renewing of the mind. The net effect of offering our bodies as a living sacrifice and renewing our minds is that we will be able to “prove” or demonstrate the perfect will of God. This is a reference to His moral will as the context shows.

Notice that the mind has something to do with discovering God’s moral will. Remember that under the New Covenant, the Law of God is written in our minds (Heb. 8:10). However, our minds need to be renewed. If we offer ourselves as a living sacrifice to the Lord, and we renew our minds, Paul says that we will know and approve the perfect will of God.

As natural creatures, we have a certain way of thinking. We have a way of reasoning that we inherited from this world. The Lord’s thoughts are not man’s thoughts. In fact, they are directly opposed to the thinking of this present world.

Yet as we renew our mind, we begin to think the way He thinks and our spiritual instincts become sharper. Our understanding and our judgment become shaped by the Lord’s mind. And His will becomes obvious to us. We become intuitively aware which actions are pleasing to Him and which are not. This is maturity. Again, I’m speaking of the moral will of God.

Paul made mention of this process when he spoke to the Corinthians. He told them that because they were living like natural people in the world (unsaved people), they were spiritual babes and couldn’t understand the things of the Spirit. But the spiritually mature are those who are able to exercise spiritual discernment and judgment (1 Cor. 2:6-3:3).

To put a finer point on it, instead of giving us orders and commands, the Lord desires for us to have a mind. “Let this

mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus . . . we have the mind of Christ” (Php. 2:5; 1 Cor. 2:16). When a son is young, he receives orders from his parents. But as he spends time getting to know his parents and matures, he cultivates an understanding of the mind of his parents in specific situations. The son’s mind, as it were, is renewed to reflect that of his parents. It is the same in the spiritual. We are sons who possess a mind rather than servants who merely take orders (John 15:15; Gal. 4:1ff.).

How do we renew our minds? Simply, by spending time in the Lord’s presence, by responding to Him, and by receiving the ministry of His Word, which contains His thoughts. By those three elements our minds are shaped in conformity to His will.

The other passage is Hebrews 5:14:

But solid food belongs to those who are of full age, that is, those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. (NKJV)

This text unearths an important principle about spiritual maturity. Namely, that as we practice yielding to the Lord, our spiritual instincts become more acute. The text says that the mature believer has his “senses” exercised by “reason of use” (or habit) to “discern” both good and evil. That is, the mature believer is able to discern the moral will of God in all situations.

Finally, we have a passage in the book of Acts that opens up another vista altogether. In Acts 24:16, Paul declares:

This being so, I myself always strive to have a conscience without offense toward God and men. (NKJV)

Each one of us has a conscience. Your conscience is an inward monitor that goes off when you step out of God’s moral will. It’s like an alarm. If you violate it, it brings you under conviction. It is not condemnation, which comes from God’s enemy or from a preacher who tells you how terrible a

Christian you are. It comes from your human spirit, the place where God dwells.

Both the Holy Spirit and your conscience bear witness to the truth (Romans 9:1). It is by your conscience that you can discern the moral will of God. Anything that offends your conscience is something to stay clear of. Anything that your conscience allows is permissible for you. There is another aspect of the conscience that we will handle in the last chapter. It has to do with the way the conscience is shaped. (The Bible also speaks about a “seared” conscience. But this is in reference to people who continue to reject the dictates of their conscience to the point that it doesn’t operate any longer—1 Tim. 4:2.)

To sum up, we have been given five lighthouses that guide us into the moral will of God: The inward promptings and instincts of the Holy Spirit written on our minds and hearts (Heb. 8; Rom. 8; Gal. 5), the testimony of Scripture (2 Tim. 3), the renewal of our minds (Rom. 12), the habitual exercise of our spiritual senses (Heb. 5), and the dictates of our conscience (Acts 24).

All of these lighthouses cause us to fulfill Paul’s word in Ephesians 5:17, “Therefore, be not unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is.” The context of this passage is referring to God’s moral will . . . the path of righteousness, which is Christ.

If you have been in the Lord for any length of time, it is not difficult to discern the moral will of God. Again, think of God’s moral will as a parking lot. A step out of love is a step outside of the parking lot. Walking in love is walking in the parking lot.

Add to that a safeguard: On moral matters, inward promptings are only reliable when they are consistent with the will of God disclosed in Scripture. This is one of the reasons why the ministry of the Word is so vital to us. It not only reveals Christ to us and feeds our spirit, but it also educates us on the way the indwelling Lord directs us. For the Christ revealed in Scripture and the Christ who lives in us is the same

Person. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb. 13:8). Praise the Lord!

Let us now handle the question of non-moral decisions. That is, how do we choose between parking spaces?

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **CHOOSING BETWEEN PARKING SPACES**

I will begin this chapter by reiterating that if you are in the parking lot, you are in the moral will of God. However, within that parking lot, there are many legitimate and acceptable spaces in which to park. The choice of the parking space is yours.

I have compiled a list of decisions that Christians agonize over in trying to discover “God’s perfect will for their lives.” In and of themselves, every decision on this list is a non-moral issue. So long as we are in the parking lot, the choice of where to park is left to you and me. They are:

- Should I go to college?
- If so, which college should I attend?
- What courses should I take, and what will be my major?
- Should I get an undergraduate degree, a masters degree, or a doctorate?
- What job should I apply for and accept?
- Should I seek a job promotion or a raise? If so, when and how?
- Where should I live?
- Should I rent, buy, or build a house?
- Should I get married?
- Who should I marry?
- If I marry, should I have kids?
- How many kids should I have?
- Should I use birth control?
- If so, what type of birth control?

- Should I have a home birth, use a midwife, or have a hospital birth?
- In what manner should I raise my children?
- Should I discipline them? If so, how and when should I discipline them?
- Should I home school, send them to private school or public school?
- What foods should I eat and what foods should I avoid?
- Should I exercise? If so, how, how often, when, and where?
- When I'm sick, should I see a doctor, believe God, take medicine or natural supplements?
- How should I manage my money? Should I make a budget? Should I save? Invest? If so, how and using what method?
- What bank should I use? Should I use credit cards? Which and how often?
- How should my spouse and I divide up the division of labor in our household? (E.g., who's going to cut the grass, wash the dishes, take out the garbage, etc.?)
- Should I buy or lease a car?
- What type of car and how many?

Christians have gone bonkers trying to find “the perfect will of God” in these matters. And they don't need to. I repeat: As long as you are in God's moral will, the above decisions are left to your choice. That statement alone should remove a load off your shoulders.

Let's take the question of “which job should I take?” An illegal job that would compromise your honesty would be outside of the parking lot. We can safely say that to make your career selling illegal drugs is outside of God's will, for instance. But the many jobs that have no immoral implications associated with them are all within the parking lot. The choice as to which one to take is left to you.

Now that still leaves us with a question: By what criteria should we choose between parking spaces? Do we expect God

to give us some special revelation on these matters? Or do we just throw up a coin and choose based upon which side the coin lands?

The Lord has not promised to give us special revelation on these non-moral issues. He has promised to lead us into His moral will, as we have already discussed. But when it comes to the plethora of non-moral decisions that are constantly before us, He has given no such promise. It is for this reason that many Christians become frustrated with God when He doesn't provide guidance on these issues. Remember the story of Jack.

### **Handling Objections**

*“But Frank, what about Proverbs 3:6 where the Lord says, Acknowledge the Lord in all your ways, and He shall direct your paths?”*

The original Hebrew of that passage says “He shall make your paths smooth or straight.” That is not a promise that God will direct you in every decision you will ever make. It is a promise that if you trust in your Lord instead of yourself, the Lord will make your paths smooth.

*“But what about what God says in Isaiah 30:21, Your ears shall hear a word behind you saying, ‘This is the way, walk in it.’ Whenever you turn to the right hand and whenever you turn to the left?”*

According to the context of this passage, Israel was in rebellion against the Lord. So God disciplined His people by giving them “the bread of affliction, and the water of adversity” (Isa. 30:20). This discipline was to bring Israel back to the place where she would again listen to her spiritual teachers. The “word” the Lord is referring to here is the knowledge of His moral will that Israel should walk in (which was the Law). The “right hand” and the “left hand” refer to those acts that are outside of God’s moral will. Proverbs 4:27 says, “Turn not to the right hand nor to the left; remove thy foot from evil” (see also Deu. 5:31-32; 17:18-20; Josh. 1:7).

Isaiah 30 is not a promise that God will guide His people in every decision they will face. It's a reference to being guided in the path of righteousness. The "way" is the way of God's moral will.

*"But what about Ephesians 2:10 which says, We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God has prepared beforehand that we should walk in them?"*

This is a perfect example of a passage that is referring to the fulfillment of God's moral will. Good works are simply deeds that originate with God's activity in and through us. God knows all of those works beforehand, just as He knows all of our actions before we were born. This is not a reference to God's leading in non-moral decisions. The scope of the passage has to do with the outworking of the righteousness of Christ in our lives.

There are other passages on the subject of the Lord's guidance that we can analyze. But let me give you one suggestion. When you come across them, look at the entire context and ask yourself, "Is the context referring to His moral will—walking in the righteousness of Christ—or is it referring to some non-moral decision?" You will find that virtually all of them have to do with the former.

### **The Greatest Parking Space of All**

Let's fine-tune this a bit, shall we? Getting back to the question, "How do we choose between parking spaces?" I'd like to use marriage as our example.

The New Testament contains some wonderful teaching on this particular subject. It shows us the boundaries of the parking lot, and it also gives us the choice of parking spaces.

When it comes to marriage, there are three core questions to address:

Whether? When? Who?

In 1 Corinthians 7, Paul discusses this issue with a fair amount of detail. The principles in this passage apply to every non-moral decision a Christian will ever make. Hence, the

reason why we're using it for this chapter. I would encourage you to read the entire chapter sometime. For our purposes, we are just going to highlight a few sections.

I wish everyone could get along without marrying, just as I do. But we are not all the same. God gives some the gift of marriage, and to others he gives the gift of singleness. Now I say to those who aren't married and to widows—it's better to stay unmarried, just as I am. But if they can't control themselves, they should go ahead and marry. It's better to marry than to burn with lust. (1 Cor. 7:7-9, NLT)

Here Paul addresses the question of whether . . . whether or not to marry. Paul was single. It is very possible that he was married at one time. But when he wrote to the Corinthian church, he was celibate. And in his judgment, it is better for a Christian to be celibate than to be married (see also 1 Cor. 7:32-35). However, this is not the case with every Christian. If a Christian cannot control themselves physically, it is better for them to marry than to stay single (see also 1 Cor. 7:36).

The choice to marry and the choice not to marry are both within the will of God. Both are inside the parking lot. To marry or not to marry are two parking spaces. The choice as to whether or not to marry is left to the judgment of each individual believer. More on that later.

So, dear brothers and sisters, whatever situation you were in when you became a believer, stay there in your new relationship with God. Now, about the young women who are not yet married. I do not have a command from the Lord for them. But the Lord in his kindness has given me wisdom that can be trusted, and I will share it with you. Because of the present crisis, I think it is best to remain just as you are. If you have a wife, do not end the marriage. If you do not have a wife, do not get married. But if you do get married, it is not a sin. And if a young woman gets married, it is not a sin. However, I am trying to spare you the extra problems that come with marriage. (1 Cor. 7:24-28, NLT)

I think that this passage is remarkable. Paul admits that God has not revealed His moral will to him on this issue. In other words, it's not a parking lot matter. It's a parking space issue. And he declares that God has given him wisdom on it.

There were monumental problems happening in Corinth when he wrote this letter. History tells us that there was a great famine going on at the time. Again, Paul leaves the decision of when to marry to the judgment of the believer. But in his opinion, given the dire conditions of the day, it was wiser for single Christians not to marry at that time. However, if they decide to marry, they are still in God's will. To marry or not to marry are within God's will. The choice is left to each individual believer.

Now we move on to the boundaries of the parking lot. That is, whom to marry.

The wife is bound by the law as long as her husband liveth; but if her husband be dead, she is at liberty to be married to whom she will; only in the Lord. (1 Cor. 7:39, KJV)

The only boundary the Lord gives us in relation to marriage has to do with the spiritual state of the potential spouse. Paul says that widows in the church are "at liberty to be married to whom they will, but only in the Lord." Notice the first part of that sentence: "She is at liberty to be married to whom she will." That's the parking space. But "only in the Lord." That's the parking lot.

A Christian is free to marry anyone as long as that person is a Christian of the opposite sex. (The Scriptures condemn homosexuality—1 Cor. 6:9.) Paul put it another way in 2 Corinthians 6:14ff. He exhorted the Corinthian Christians not to be "unequally yoked" together with unbelievers. Marriage is the heaviest yoke of all.

Consequently, when it comes to marriage, the choices of whether or not to marry, when to marry, and who to marry are all parking spaces within God's moral will. The boundaries of the parking lot are simply that it is God's will that a believer marry a fellow believer of the opposite sex.

What, then, is the criteria for deciding on which parking space is the best choice?

### **The Importance of Wisdom**

I'm going to write this with red fire in the sky. In making non-moral (but important) decisions, the Lord has given us a criteria by which to decide. It is wisdom. And when it comes to selecting a spouse, you will need all the wisdom in this universe to make a choice that you won't regret. Consider the promise of Scripture:

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all liberally and without reproach, and it will be given to him. But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for he who doubts is like a wave of the sea driven and tossed by the wind. For let not that man suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways. (James 1:5-8, NKJV)

Another word for wisdom is discernment or sound judgment. Again, you can be in God's moral will and still make a foolish or unwise decision. You can park your car in a foolish space, even though you are parking in the parking lot of God's will. You haven't sinned or missed God's will. You've just not been very wise.

If you have been enslaved to the idea that God's will is like a train track, this ought to liberate you. I am trying to spare you lots of frustration, confusion, and guilt. The beauty of what James tells us is that wisdom is available to us. All that is required is to request it in faith.

Wisdom is the ability to discern what is spiritually advantageous in a given situation. Suppose that I'm a young, stupid, single brother of 20 years of age. My body is pumping with hormones, and I'm being tempted left and right. I'm having a fierce struggle with my thoughts and desires. It would be profoundly foolish of me to make a vow to the Lord that I will be celibate my entire life! Are you following me? That's just plain moronic.

You, sir, don't need God to reveal to you in a dream, by an angel, an inward impression, or a Divine sign that you ought to seek marriage. Wisdom will give you that knowledge.

Now if you are a Christian man or a Christian woman, to marry any Christian of the opposite sex is within the parking lot of God's moral will. Paul said that he had the liberty to marry a sister in the Lord and take her on his ministry trips, as was the practice of Peter and the other apostles (1 Cor. 9:5). So Paul was free to marry a sister in Christ. But let me tell you something. You would be very foolish to pick just any sister or brother as a marriage partner. It requires wisdom to discover which sister or which brother you will be compatible with for the long haul without constant misery.

So if you marry a Christian, you are within God's moral will. But you would be very wise to marry a Christian who is compatible with you. Consequently, you do well to acquire wisdom for such decisions.

Wisdom asks, "What is going to be spiritually advantageous to me and to others? What decision will best promote the kingdom of God? What decision will be best for all involved, including myself?"

There may be many decisions that are of equal spiritual benefit. It matters not which one you pick. They are equally wise. On the other hand, there are those decisions that will mean great profit or great loss for many years depending on your choice. And when it comes to the realm of single adults who are eligible for marriage, this is not a case of equal options. The question of when to marry also requires wisdom to make a prudent choice.

In short, the Lord has not promised to lead us supernaturally in non-moral decisions. But He has promised to grant us wisdom.

So how does one acquire wisdom in making a non-moral decision? One way is simply to ask the Lord for it. This does not mean that He's going to give you some kind of supernatural revelation, sign, or impression. Wisdom involves discernment; it involves sound judgment.

God gives us wisdom most typically through the experience of life (often by our own mistakes or the mistakes of others). When we are young, we are wise to gain wisdom from those who are older than us (Prov. 13:20). We are wise to learn from those who have more experience in life. Proverbs is a book that is filled with the wisdom of King Solomon, who was the wisest man on the earth before Christ entered human history. Solomon's wisdom is recorded for all of us to glean from.

There is also wisdom in the Body of Christ. The Body includes those servants of God who have gone before us (through their writings and their testimony). It also includes those living saints with whom we can fellowship over important matters.

Let me make this real practical. If I'm going to purchase a car, in order to make a wise decision, I will rely on those who have more knowledge about cars than I do. I will even read up on the subject by those who have researched it. While the Lord may supernaturally reveal to me to buy a certain car, He has given no such promise. Hence, I cannot expect Him to do so.

But I can expect Him to give me wisdom if I ask for it. And I can seek for wisdom as the book of Proverbs exhorts us to do (Prov. 4:5ff; 8:1ff). A wise person receives instruction from those who are wiser than himself (Prov. 9:9).

Here is a bit of wisdom straight from Proverbs: "In the multitude of counselors there is safety" (Prov. 11:14; 24:6). That's a piece of gold that you can put in your pocket for life.

### **Examples of Wisdom in the New Testament**

When the church in Jerusalem met its first crisis, the apostles said, "Pick seven men among you who are spiritual and who have wisdom." Why? So that they can decode the road signs and the inward impressions that God would give them? No! So that they would make a prudent exercise of judgment in resolving the crisis.

In the Corinthian church, there were some brothers taking other brothers to the secular courts to resolve personal conflicts. What was Paul's solution? He said, "Choose out

among you those believers who can decipher inward impressions and interpret outward signs.” No! He didn’t say that. He said, “Is there not a wise man among you who can settle these disputes?”

And when Paul gives instruction about elders in his letters to Timothy and Titus, he says that the elders are those who “are sensible and discreet.” In other words, they possess wisdom and sound judgment (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:8; 2:2).

In Acts 15, we have a beautiful record about what the church in Jerusalem did in making a major decision. After a long discussion, the apostles and the church say this: “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” to do thus and so. “It seemed good to us.” This is wisdom.

What is more astounding is that Luke uses these very words in his opening to his Gospel. “It seemed good to me, having had perfect understanding of all things from the beginning, to write to you.” It “seemed good” to Luke to write the Gospel called “Luke,” and the Holy Spirit inspired every word!

Wisdom is not your own natural reasoning independent of God. It comes out of dependence on the Lord. What is more, true wisdom not only comes from God. True wisdom is Jesus Christ personified!

So any piece of authentic wisdom that you receive comes from your Lord, for He is Wisdom. Note the following exhortations to exercise judgment, which is wisdom’s cousin:

Do not judge according to appearance, but **JUDGE** with righteous **JUDGMENT**. (John 7:24, NKJV)

**TEST** all things; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil. (1 Thess. 5:21-22, NKJV)

**CONSIDER** what I say, and may the Lord give you **UNDERSTANDING** in all things. (2 Tim. 2:7, NKJV)

See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as **WISE**, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be unwise, but **UNDERSTAND** what the will of the Lord is. (Eph. 5:15-17, NKJV)

I speak as to WISE men; JUDGE for yourselves what I say. (1 Cor. 10:15, NKJV)

JUDGE among yourselves . . . (1 Cor. 11:13, NKJV)

Let the two or three prophets speak, and let the others JUDGE. (1 Cor. 14:29, NKJV)

In sum, to make decisions regarding God's moral will . . . to find the parking lot . . . we have the witness of the indwelling Spirit, the witness of our conscience, and the witness of the Scriptures. But in making non-moral decisions, God has promised to give wisdom to those who seek it.

Allow me to add a footnote to that. All decisions and plans we make should be subjected to the sovereign will of God. This is important. Planning is fine, and it is quite Scriptural. But when we plan, our inward attitude is one of submitting to God's sovereign will, for God may decide to change our plans. In his epistle, James encourages planning. But he exhorts that all plans should be subjected to God's sovereign will.

Come now, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit"; whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. Instead you ought to say, "If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that." But now you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil. (James 4:13-16, NKJV)

God's sovereign will is over everything we do. Acknowledging the Lord is to acknowledge His sovereign will and to yield our plans to Him. In doing so, we have an attitude and outlook that says, "Lord, I wish to do such and such. But only if you are willing. I submit to your will in all things."

When we adopt this posture, we are recognizing that the Lord may have a different plan for us. Thus we give Him our consent to cut into our plans if He so chooses. To submit under

His mighty hand, as Peter says, we are giving Him permission to change our plans, and we will not fight or resist it if He does.

Have you ever sensed inside your being that you were trying to force or drive something to happen? This most always means that you are resisting God's sovereign will. In such times, it is better to take your hands off the situation, and let God do what He wants. When the Lord is driving something, there is a calm poise about it. A certain flowing and ease. The sense of "human force" is not present.

In the New Testament, we find Paul exercising this outlook (Rom. 15:32; 1 Cor. 4:19; 16:7). He will often say, "I plan to visit you shortly, if the Lord wills." Paul submitted everything to God's sovereign will lest he find himself kicking against the Lord Himself. One of the greatest struggles in the Christian life is found here: It is learning to let go and put matters of personal interest into God's hands. Learning to do this is a sign of spiritual maturity.

### **A Story in Summary**

When it comes to non-moral issues such as the decisions I listed at the outset of this chapter (e.g., where to go to school, who to marry, what job to take, how many children to have, etc.), God certainly can give you supernatural guidance. However, He has given us no such promise. He leaves the decisions in these areas to our discernment.

However, if He does lead you in some supernatural way on a non-moral issue—be it an inward prompting, a "personal prophecy," or an outward sign such as a dream or vision—it should only be trusted if it is consistent with wisdom (sound judgment) and the moral will of God disclosed in Scripture.

If God's people would pay heed to the above principle, it would spare them from making many foolish decisions in life. It certainly would have spared Jack from missing out on two wonderful opportunities that the Lord brought his way.

I'd like to mention one further point on this score. Even if you make a foolish decision . . . even if you make a mistake in judgment . . . even if you miss a golden opportunity due to an

error in judgment, God's sovereign will is so grand that He works all things together for the good of those who love Him (Rom. 8:28).

This is not an excuse to make foolish decisions deliberately. But it certainly does remove the pressure to always make the best decision. If we are yielded to Him, the Lord will forge wisdom within us on the anvil of our mistakes. This is the genius of our God. He has a way of making lemonade out of our lemons. So while I am trying to mitigate the pain and damage that foolish decisions reap, experience (even when brutal) is a very effective teacher.

I will end this chapter by summarizing what we've learned by telling you a story. I have known two couples in my life that made the same decisions, but the results were drastically different. We will call the first couple Don and Deb. The other couple we will call Jim and Jen.

Don and Deb both graduated college at the same time. They married shortly afterward. Don has a good-paying job. Deb chose to be a housewife. Both are highly educated and love children. Don and Deb come from large families and both have dreamed of having large families all their lives. So after looking at their long-term financial situation, and after judging what would be spiritually advantageous to them—weighing the costs and the benefits practically—they made the decision to not use birth control. As a result, the couple ended up having more than five children. They own a large home with five bedrooms. After doing a great deal of research and soul-searching, they also decided that Deb would homeschool the children.

I've watched this family firsthand. The children are all very well disciplined. Deb is very educated, and she does a great job homeschooling. The kids are more mature than most children of the same age who attend public school. And they are more advanced intellectually. What is more, Don and Deb are highly skilled parents. They had great role models growing up, and they are avid readers on parenting. They have a wealth of

patience and possess the emotional resources to take on their army of little ones.

Now let's shift the scene to Jim and Jen. After they married, Jim and Jen went to a Christian life seminar that lasted a week or so. In it, they were taught that God's will is for all Christians to have large families. They were also taught that God is against any form of birth control. Further, they were taught that God wants all Christians to homeschool their children because public schools are evil.

Consequently, Jim and Jen began having children immediately. Jim has always had trouble nailing down steady work, so he's moved from job to job. Jim and Jen have more than five children. However, they have an enormous struggle meeting their bills and caring for their children. Consequently, they live in constant debt.

Further, Jen homeschools the kids, as she was taught in the seminar. But she's not very good at it. Her children are less mature and less educated than children of the same age who attend public school. Add to that, Jim and Jen have great trouble handling their children. They don't seem to have the patience or the emotional resources to handle their little army. They did fine with two children. But when the family grew beyond that number, life began to break down. There is constant fighting, bickering, conflict, and stress in the home.

So we have two different couples making the same decisions for different reasons. I leave you with this question:

Which couple used wisdom to make their decisions and which did not?

## **CHAPTER 4**

# **SHARING THE LOT WITH FELLOW CHRISTIANS**

We have learned that God has promised to lead and guide us into His moral will. And we discussed how He leads us into His moral will. We also pointed out that God's will is a lot like a parking lot.

In addition, we discovered that in non-moral areas, God leaves the decision to us. The non-moral decisions of life can be likened to the parking spaces that are within the parking lot of God's moral will. The Lord has also promised to give us wisdom in making such decisions.

But what happens when Christians who fellowship together hold to different views on the boundaries of the parking lot? That is, what do you do if your brother or sister in Christ believes that a particular practice that you regard as a legitimate parking space is outside of God's will? That's the subject of this chapter.

I will say quite candidly that if you can wrap your arms around the principles laid out in this chapter, it will save a church from many splits and conflicts.

There are many things that are not sinful. But they are not spiritual either. Morally speaking, they are neutral in God's eyes. They are parking spaces. And God leaves the choice to us.

God's moral will is one thing. But the application of it is another. When Christians differ on the boundaries of the parking lot, it is typically a case of a difference on how the moral will of God should be applied.

For instance, God's moral will is that Christians be separate from the world (John 15:19ff.; 2 Cor. 6:14ff.; Rom. 12:2; Jam.

1:27; 1 John 2:15ff.). But how exactly a Christian is to be separate from the world is an open question.

With that said, the Holy Spirit must bring the rest of this message. You will not find any specific rules to follow in the ensuing pages. But you will be introduced to some broad principles that are envisioned in the New Testament. Principles which will help you to follow the mind of the Spirit in such matters. The Holy Spirit give you light and apply these principles specifically to your life.

### **Returning to Mount Sinai**

I have been a Christian for over thirty years now. And I have met scores of believers who had their own convictions about the boundaries of God's will that were not shared with other believers. Moses delivered the Law from Mount Sinai. That was the beginning of the 613 laws found in the Old Covenant.

Interestingly, Christians have devised their own set of laws. What follows is a list of convictions held by various Christians that I have known throughout the years:

God's will is for all Christians . . .

- to never listen to secular music.
- to vote Republican.
- to vote Democrat.
- to begin a ministry for homeless people and prisoners.
- to begin a campaign to fight abortion, pornography, and gay marriage.
- to not own a television set.
- to not own two television sets.
- to never support the military and to be against all wars.
- to have home births.
- to homeschool their children.
- to not use birth control.
- to have as many children as possible.
- to watch only G or PG movies.
- to not attend movie cinemas or theaters.

- to never dance unless it is to Christian worship music.
- to never drink alcohol.
- to never see a psychologist or psychiatrist.
- to speak in tongues.
- to never speak in tongues.
- to never see a doctor, but to believe God for healing.
- to not use medicines, only herbs and natural supplements.
- to never eat meat.
- to keep the Sabbath (Saturday) holy.
- to keep Sunday holy.
- to tithe to their local church from their net income.
- to tithe to their local church from their gross income.
- to give as they have purposed in their heart to give.
- to avoid the unclean foods listed in the Law of Moses.
- to not watch the news or read newspapers.
- to never spend more than \$30 on a watch.
- to read their Bible every day.
- to pray at least one hour a day.
- to never buy a lottery ticket.
- to witness to at least one unsaved person each day.
- to not celebrate Christmas (they shouldn't have a Christmas tree, lights, or exchange presents).
- to not allow their kids to participate in Easter egg hunts or go trick-or-treating.
- to not own expensive vehicles.
- to not own insurance.
- to not lock their car doors.
- to not lock the doors of their house.

God's will is for Christian women . . .

- to never wear jewelry.
- to wear a veil on their heads in church gatherings.
- to never cut their hair.
- to wear clothing that never exposes their legs.

- to be silent in church meetings.
- to never wear a bikini.

## **The Limitations of Personal Conscience**

In Chapter 2, we discussed the conscience. The conscience is an internal guide into God's moral will. However, the conscience is limited by knowledge.

Every person has an internal line that is drawn by his or her conscience. If you cross that line, you have sinned. Yet because the line drawn by our conscience is limited by our knowledge, the line of some Christians will differ from others.

Consequently, I may engage in a certain behavior that my conscience condemns. That certain behavior is sin to me. However, you may engage in that same behavior, and your conscience will not condemn you. Thus it will not be a sin for you. Why is this? It is because the conscience is limited by knowledge.

For example, I knew a man once who was taught as a young child that the movie theater is the house of devils. Consequently, if this man even walked into a movie theater, his conscience would condemn him. For him, to do such a thing would be willfully sinning against his Lord.

For other Christians, this is not the case. They could walk into a movie theater without wincing. And they can even glorify God in doing so.

The conscience is the current standard of God's will for our lives. It must be obeyed else it will condemn us. Typically, mature Christians have more freedom than do immature Christians. This is because mature Christians tend to have more knowledge. As Paul said, "Unto the pure all things are pure . . ." (Titus 1:15). "All things are lawful, but not all things are spiritually profitable or edifying" (1 Cor. 6:12; 10:23).

## **Food Fights and Sabbath Wars**

The New Testament gives us two instructive examples of how Christians can encounter conflict over issues of

conscience. One was in the church in Rome; the other was in the church in Corinth. Let us look at both. I would then like to extract from these two scenes some enduring principles that I believe will deliver us from splitting the Body of Christ over matters of personal conscience.

The first has to do with the problems in the church in Rome. Here are some excerpts from Romans 14 and 15 where Paul addresses the issue:

Accept Christians who are weak in faith, and don't argue with them about what they think is right or wrong. For instance, one person believes it is all right to eat anything. But another believer who has a sensitive conscience will eat only vegetables. Those who think it is all right to eat anything must not look down on those who won't. And those who won't eat certain foods must not condemn those who do, for God has accepted them. Who are you to condemn God's servants? They are responsible to the Lord, so let him tell them whether they are right or wrong. The Lord's power will help them do as they should.

In the same way, some think one day is more holy than another day, while others think every day is alike. Each person should have a personal conviction about this matter. Those who have a special day for worshiping the Lord are trying to honor him. Those who eat all kinds of food do so to honor the Lord, since they give thanks to God before eating. And those who won't eat everything also want to please the Lord and give thanks to God.

For we are not our own masters when we live or when we die. While we live, we live to please the Lord. And when we die, we go to be with the Lord. So in life and in death, we belong to the Lord. Christ died and rose again for this very purpose, so that he might be Lord of those who are alive and of those who have died.

So why do you condemn another Christian? Why do you look down on another Christian? Remember, each of us will stand personally before the judgment seat of God. For the Scriptures say, "As surely as I live," says the Lord, "every

knee will bow to me and every tongue will confess allegiance to God.””

Yes, each of us will have to give a personal account to God. So don't condemn each other anymore. Decide instead to live in such a way that you will not put an obstacle in another Christian's path.

I know and am perfectly sure on the authority of the Lord Jesus that no food, in and of itself, is wrong to eat. But if someone believes it is wrong, then for that person it is wrong. And if another Christian is distressed by what you eat, you are not acting in love if you eat it. Don't let your eating ruin someone for whom Christ died. Then you will not be condemned for doing something you know is all right.

Don't tear apart the work of God over what you eat. Remember, there is nothing wrong with these things in themselves. But it is wrong to eat anything if it makes another person stumble. Don't eat meat or drink wine or do anything else if it might cause another Christian to stumble.

You may have the faith to believe that there is nothing wrong with what you are doing, but keep it between yourself and God. Blessed are those who do not condemn themselves by doing something they know is all right. But if people have doubts about whether they should eat something, they shouldn't eat it. They would be condemned for not acting in faith before God. If you do anything you believe is not right, you are sinning.

We may know that these things make no difference, but we cannot just go ahead and do them to please ourselves. We must be considerate of the doubts and fears of those who think these things are wrong. We should please others. If we do what helps them, we will build them up in the Lord. For even Christ didn't please himself. As the Scriptures say, "Those who insult you are also insulting me." Such things were written in the Scriptures long ago to teach us. They give us hope and encouragement as we wait patiently for God's promises.

May God, who gives this patience and encouragement, help you live in complete harmony with each other—each with the

attitude of Christ Jesus toward the other. Then all of you can join together with one voice, giving praise and glory to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. So accept each other just as Christ has accepted you; then God will be glorified. (Romans 14:1-15:7, NLT)

In Corinth, the issue was different, but the principle was the same. Some in the church felt that eating meat offered to idols was sinful. Others had knowledge that idols were not real, therefore, they had perfect liberty in eating such meat. Here is Paul's instruction:

However, not all Christians realize this. Some are accustomed to thinking of idols as being real, so when they eat food that has been offered to idols, they think of it as the worship of real gods, and their weak consciences are violated. It's true that we can't win God's approval by what we eat. We don't miss out on anything if we don't eat it, and we don't gain anything if we do. But you must be careful with this freedom of yours. Do not cause a brother or sister with a weaker conscience to stumble.

You see, this is what can happen: Weak Christians who think it is wrong to eat this food will see you eating in the temple of an idol. You know there's nothing wrong with it, but they will be encouraged to violate their conscience by eating food that has been dedicated to the idol. So because of your superior knowledge, a weak Christian, for whom Christ died, will be destroyed.

And you are sinning against Christ when you sin against other Christians by encouraging them to do something they believe is wrong. If what I eat is going to make another Christian sin, I will never eat meat again as long as I live—for I don't want to make another Christian stumble. (1 Cor. 8:7-13, NLT)

### **Three Kinds of Christians**

Based on these passages, we notice that there are three different kinds of Christians in a local assembly. Allow me to introduce them to you.

1. *The Weak in Conscience.* This person is also said to be “weak in faith.” Faith, in this sense, does not refer to saving faith. It rather refers to conviction about non-moral issues. So we can say that the “weak in conscience” are also “weak in conviction.”

The person with a weak conscience believes that certain non-moral practices are sinful. The reason is because they have been wrongly instructed. Such people have an oversensitive conscience. If the weak in conscience participate in something that offends their conscience, even though in the eyes of God it is not morally wrong, their conscience will condemn them. They will feel as though they have sinned, and they will lose their peace with God until they repent.

2. *The Strong in Conscience.* This person is also said to be “strong in faith” or conviction. The person with a strong conscience has knowledge that trivial matters have no moral significance. Their conscience is strong; therefore, it is not offended when they engage in non-moral activities. The strong in conscience have freedom to practice such things without feeling guilty. They also have the discernment to distinguish between moral and non-moral practices.

3. *The Legalist.* This person has a weak conscience. But he insists on pressuring others to conform to the dictates of his weak conscience. The legalist demands that everyone else adopt the same standards to which he holds. The legalist fails to distinguish between Divine commands and personal application. He universalizes his own personal standards of what is morally acceptable to God. At heart, he is a Pharisee. Consequently, he judges and condemns his fellow brethren in Christ who disagree with him. He also puts pressure on them to adopt his convictions.

Paul exposes these three kinds of Christians in the above passages. I’d like to raise the standard that Paul raised. It is as follows:

1. *Each person should have a personal conviction about the matter (Rom. 14:5).* Another translation puts it this way: “Let every man be fully persuaded in his own mind.” Develop your

own convictions on how to apply God's moral will. If you can act in faith that a particular action is permissible, then go ahead with it. If you cannot, abstain from it. It is as simple as that.

2. *Receive your brother and sister in Christ even though their convictions may differ from yours.* The only criteria for Christian fellowship is this: Has God received this person? If God has received someone into His family, then who are you to reject them? If someone trusts in the Savior, Jesus Christ, then God has received them.

3. *Do not judge your brother or sister.* God's evaluation of a person comes at the end of the construction project. We are not to judge the Lord's work along the way. Paul thunders against the folly of judging someone else's servant. There is an ancient Indian proverb that says, "Do not judge another man until you've walked two miles in his moccasins." There is a wealth of wisdom in that quote. Namely, resist the urge to become bitterly critical of your fellow brethren in Christ, especially if you've never walked in their shoes.

What follows are Paul's instructions for the three kinds of people I just described. If you can find yourself here and embrace the wisdom of Paul, you will go a long way toward sparing the Body of Christ the strain of innumerable conflicts and divisions. Note that these are not rules or commands. They are exhortations given to your new man in Christ. Receive them as such.

*To the Weak in Conscience.* Do not judge your brother or sister who indulges in something you consider to be wrong. Neither condemn them nor criticize them. Do not call them "loose" or "immoral" or "less spiritual" than you. Love thinks no evil. Believe the best. Believe that they have a strong conscience and that their practice is "unto the Lord." Do not try to manipulate them or hold them to your standard either. Neither try to adopt and imitate their standard of conviction, lest you violate your own conscience. Remember that you are not their Judge or Master.

*To the Strong in Conscience.* Exercise your freedom, but do not flaunt it. Neither evangelize or parade it in front of others.

Do not criticize or act condescending toward the weak in conscience. Do not call them “legalistic” or look down on them as being less spiritual or inferior in light than you. Enjoy your freedom. Don’t be paranoid about phantom weak-conscience believers who may be lurking around you without your knowledge. If a weaker believer identifies himself or you are aware that such a person is present, then exercise restraint on your freedom lest you make him stumble. Do not try to persuade him to have a stronger conscience either. Love thinks no evil. Believe that the weak in conscience is abstaining “unto the Lord.” The responsibility for maintaining the integrity of the relationship between weak and strong falls on you who are strong. “We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak and not to please ourselves” (Rom. 15:1). For this is the way of Jesus Christ. As Martin Luther once put it, “A Christian man is a most free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian man is a most dutiful servant of all, subject to all.”

*To the Legalist.* Follow your own standards of conduct. Take heed to your own conscience. But do not force your standards onto others. Do not lobby or politic for them. Do not judge your weaker brethren. Do not criticize them. Do not try to persuade them to your view. Guard against a Pharisaical spirit which puts undue pressure on God’s people to conform to your convictions. Be not deceived: There are few things that are more antagonistic to the spirit of Christ than Pharisaism.

I think it goes without saying that we are talking about issues of the conscience and the application of God’s moral will. We are not talking about issues of clear, unmistakable, and unrepentant sin that are clearly condemned by Scripture. The latter are to be addressed in a different manner altogether. Yet the grace of God should take the lead in such situations as well. Woe to the person who deals with his brother or sister with law instead of grace!

## **Utterly Free, Yet Not Bound to Freedom**

Paul's life embodied all that he taught. This is especially true in the area of Christian liberty and freedom. Consider his words:

When I am with the Jews, I become one of them so that I can bring them to Christ. When I am with those who follow the Jewish laws, I do the same, even though I am not subject to the law, so that I can bring them to Christ. When I am with the Gentiles who do not have the Jewish law, I fit in with them as much as I can. In this way, I gain their confidence and bring them to Christ. But I do not discard the law of God; I obey the law of Christ. When I am with those who are oppressed, I share their oppression so that I might bring them to Christ. Yes, I try to find common ground with everyone so that I might bring them to Christ. I do all this to spread the Good News, and in doing so I enjoy its blessings. (1 Cor. 9:20-23, NLT)

Paul knew his freedom in Christ. He was utterly and totally liberated. His conscience was strong. (Yet he was bound to the "Law of Christ" which indwelt Him—Rom. 8:1-4. Freedom from the Law doesn't mean freedom from Jesus Christ.) Paul was so free that he was not in bondage to his own freedom! What a high mark to hit!

## **Conclusion**

One of the Lord's chief goals for you, His child, is spiritual maturity (Col. 1:28; 4:12; Rom. 12:2-3; Eph. 4:14-15; Php. 3:16; Jam. 1:4). Our heavenly Father intends to make His children spiritual adults. He calls us to be full sons.

Servants are given orders. They are given very little freedom to exercise their own preferences or choices. Sons are given the life of their Father as well as understanding into His will and ways (John 15:15; Gal. 4:1ff.). They are given abundant freedom of choice. A large part of spiritual maturity is learning to develop discernment and sound judgment so as to make wise choices that reflect God's heart.

I trust that this message will be helpful to all of God's people who will read it. Especially those who have struggled

with the will of God, either in their own lives or with respect to the practice of other Christians. So stand fast in the liberty wherein Christ has set you free, and be not entangled again with the yoke of bondage (Gal. 5:1).

## **APPENDIX**

### **The Will of God in Scripture**

The following list shows the four ways in which the phrase will of God is used throughout the Bible. Scriptures are taken from the NIV and the KJV.

#### *God's Eternal Will: His Divine Purpose - His Ultimate Intention*

- Acts 20:27 For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God.
- Rom 8:27 And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will.
- Eph 1:9 And he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ.
- Eph 1:11 In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will.
- Col 1:9 For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding.

#### *God's Sovereign Will: His Permissive Will - His Hidden Will*

- Deut 10:10 Now I had stayed on the mountain forty days and nights, as I did the first time, and the Lord listened to me at this time also. It was not his will to destroy you.

- Psa 147:4 He determines the number of the stars and calls them each by name.
- Prov 16:9 In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps.
- Prov 21:1 The king's heart is in the hand of the Lord; he directs it like a watercourse wherever he pleases.
- Acts 4:27-28 Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen.
- Acts 17:26 From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live.
- Acts 18:21 But as he left, he promised, "I will come back if it is God's will." Then he set sail from Ephesus.
- Acts 21:14 When he would not be dissuaded, we gave up and said, "The Lord's will be done."
- Jas 4:15 Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that."
- Rom 1:10 And I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be opened for me to come to you.
- Rom 9:19 One of you will say to me: "Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?"
- Rom 15:32 So that by God's will I may come to you with joy and together with you be refreshed.
- 1 Cor 4:19 But I will come to you very soon, if the Lord is willing, and then I will find out not only how these arrogant people are talking, but what power they have.
- 1 Cor 16:7 I do not want to see you now and make only a passing visit; I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits.
- 1 Pet 3:17 It is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing good than for doing evil.

## *God's Moral Will: His Perfect Will - His Revealed Will*

- Ezra 10:11 Now make confession to the LORD, the God of your fathers, and do his will. Separate yourselves from the peoples around you and from your foreign wives.
- Psa 103:21 Praise the LORD, all his heavenly hosts, you his servants who do his will.
- Matt 7:21 Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven.
- Matt 12:50 For whosoever shall do the will of my Father which is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother.
- Mark 3:35 Whoever does God's will is my brother and sister and mother.
- John 4:34 Jesus saith unto them, My meat is to do the will of him that sent me, and to finish his work.
- John 5:30 I can of mine own self do nothing: as I hear, I judge: and my judgment is just; because I seek not mine own will, but the will of the Father which hath sent me.
- John 6:38 For I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me.
- John 6:40 And this is the will of him that sent me, that every one which seeth the Son, and believeth on him, may have everlasting life: and I will raise him up at the last day.
- John 7:17 If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own.
- John 9:31 We know that God does not listen to sinners. He listens to the godly man who does his will.
- Acts 22:14 Then he said: 'The God of our fathers has chosen you to know his will and to see the Righteous One and to hear words from his mouth.
- Rom 2:18 . . . if you know his will and approve of what is superior because you are instructed by the law.

- Rom 12:2 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.
- 2 Cor 8:5 And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will.
- Eph 5:17 Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is.
- Eph 6:6 Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but like slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart.
- Col 4:12 Epaphras . . . is always wrestling in prayer for you, that you may stand firm in all the will of God, mature and fully assured.
- 1 Thess 4:3 It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality.
- 1 Thess 5:18 Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.
- Heb 10:36 You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.
- Heb 13:21 . . . equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.
- 1 Pet 2:15 For it is God's will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men.
- 1 Pet 4:2 As a result, he does not live the rest of his earthly life for evil human desires, but rather for the will of God.
- 1 Pet 4:19 So then, those who suffer according to God's will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.
- 2 Pet 3:9 The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to

usward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.

- 1 John 2:17 The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.
- 1 John 5:14 This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.

### *God's Will in Calling and Gifting in the Body of Christ*

- 1 Cor 1:1 Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.
- 1 Cor 12:11 But all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he will.
- 2 Cor 1:1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother.
- Eph 1:1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.
- Col 1:1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.
- 2 Tim 1:1 Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.
- Heb 2:4 God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.