

Knowing God's Will: Between the Fences

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A number of years ago, my family had the wonderful experience of spending a year at a cabin in the woods while I was on a writing sabbatical. We chose a cabin about an hour from St. Louis so we could be far enough away from normal seminary operations for me to get my writing done, while still being close enough to St. Louis for my wife, Kathy, to perform her job as choir director at our church.

One Wednesday night after choir rehearsal, Kathy called me to say that she and the children were going to try to make it back out to the cabin despite the fact that it was snowing. The snow had not been falling for long and the highways should still be passable. The only problem would be the two miles of twisting, hilly, country lanes that led up to the cabin—lanes that got slippery fast and had more than one treacherous turn. We decided she should come ahead, and that I would hike out to the main road to meet her.

As soon as I began hiking to the main road, I realized we were in trouble. The snow was coming far faster than we had anticipated, and it was rapidly covering those country lanes from edge to edge. By the time Kathy arrived at our meeting point, you could not even tell that there was a road. I got into the van, and we began to inch our way forward. We discovered that we could still see the fence lines that ran down the sides. Even though the road ahead was not clear, we could stay on track by staying between the fences.

In all my years of pastoring—both in the church and at Covenant Seminary—there is one question that has been asked of me more frequently than all others combined: “How do I know God’s will?” I do not have an exhaustive answer for this question, but a passage to which I have repeatedly turned is I Thessalonians 4. For me this chapter gives guidelines similar to those which directed my family through those snowy lanes. It does not remove all obscurity regarding what is ahead, but it does tell us what we must do to stay in God’s will—keep between the fences.

THE FENCE OF CHRISTIAN RIGHTEOUSNESS

The first fence that guides us in God’s will is the fence of Christian righteousness. Our first question when making a decision or considering an option is, “Is it righteous?” If a certain choice will cause us to participate in unrighteousness—either because what we are seeking is wrong, or what will be needed to get there is wrong—then that is a wrong path even if the destination is right.

Staying within the fence line of righteousness requires us to do two things: honor God’s authority, and obey His standards.

Honoring God’s Authority

In the opening verses of 1 Thessalonians 4, Paul reminds us of the authority behind the standards he will give. "For you know what instructions we gave you by the authority of the Lord Jesus" (vs. 2). The apostle makes such a point of the authority of his instruction for the ancient church and for us because he wants to remind us that staying in God's path is not right merely because we walked this way in the past, nor because we like the path in the present, but because the path has been laid by a higher authority. The Biblical path may seem to lead into a valley; it may not feel right; and we may strike some potholes along the way. Still, the path indicated by God is the proper path.

If we do not understand that the instructions of God's Word are more authoritative than personal priorities or feelings, then we will not be prepared to do what God requires.

Obeying God's Standards

What do you know without question is God's will for you? Does God want you to go to Timbuktu or marry Nancy Sue? Usually we cannot speak with total certainty about such issues, but we can know with certainty God's will as stated in Scripture. Paul's words in 1 Thessalonians 4:3 tell us: "It is God's will that you should be sanctified." God's will is that you should be more like Him, of this you should have no doubt. Nor should you doubt how God expects for this increase of His likeness to occur in you—by obeying His standards. We see in verses three through five of this passage standards related primarily to sexual purity:

It is God's will that you should be sanctified: that you should avoid sexual immorality; that each of you should learn to control his own body in a way that is holy and honorable, not in passionate lust like the heathen, who do not know God; and that in this matter no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him. The Lord will punish men for all such sins, as we have already told you and warned you. (1 Thess. 4:3-6)

But these verses reveal to us other values that God wishes us to heed as well. The call to sexual purity is initially a call to be mindful of one's self (vss. 3-4), but then in verse 6 Paul tells us that we should be pure out of concern for others: "and that in this matter no one should wrong his brother or take advantage of him." Sexual immorality affects other people as well as ourselves as present or future spouses are robbed of the purity and unity that God intends for marriage. God's standards require us to obey Him and to consider the impact of our actions on others.

After giving the Thessalonians the prohibition, Paul adds the warning of God's judgment as a reason to heed God's moral standards (v. 6). Thus Paul makes it quite clear in this passage that once God has addressed an issue, then His will is for you to do as He has instructed. This is just as true for issues addressed in other parts of Scripture. We do not need to wonder if it is God's will for us to remain sexually pure, deal honestly in our business practices, or love our spouses. God has answered these questions. The Christian who wants a sign in the heavens to confirm that he should be faithful to his wife, or take a job with a company known for unethical business dealings is seeking to read God's will in the wrong places. What God has already said about these matters is authoritative and is not going to change.

But what if specific instruction has not already been given? If God has not addressed the issue, do not pretend that He has. Only God's standards have the force of moral imperative.

I hear many Christians giving moral status to "life options" rather than "life standards." They say, "I do not know what to do, I have these two options, and I can only pick one. I must know God's will, because I do not want to be out of God's will." In saying as much they give the status of right or wrong—moral or immoral—to life options. This is dangerous.

First, such an assessment can create choice paralysis—doing nothing because something might be wrong. Second, assigning moral status to life options causes us to add new standards to God's Word where we have no authority to do so. It is far better to rejoice that God has given us options, a blessing of multiple right choices, than to condemn an option as evil without the warrant of God's Word.

We must also remember that if each of the options is righteous, then we are not to become lawgivers and condemn that which God has not condemned. But the fact that more than one option can be righteous now leads to another question. If there are two righteous options, then how do I choose between them?

THE FENCE OF CHRISTIAN PRUDENCE

Christian prudence does not allow us to dispense with issues of right and wrong. Rather, prudence involves using Biblical principles and priorities to make wise choices among righteous options. The fence of righteousness keeps us on the road of God's will, but prudence can help us stay in the lane which is best for us.

As Paul continues in 1 Thessalonians 4, he moves to a different category of instruction. Whereas the early verses (3-8) were prohibitions against immorality and taking advantage of others, the later verses (9-12) give instructions about matters that involve judgment by weighing priorities in the heart:

Now about brotherly love we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. And in fact, you do love all the brothers throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers, to do so more and more. Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody. (1 Thess. 4:9-12)

The first question to consider in prudentially weighing an action is:

Is It Loving?

We cannot make Christian decisions without Christian priorities in place, chief of which is God's command to love others. This means that concern for self becomes secondary to the needs of others.

Are you willing to consider the good of others, and how this decision may impact them? Are you willing to suffer hardship for the sake of their good, and for their knowledge of the gospel?

These are not always easy questions to answer. They may require a deep searching of the heart, so Paul gives us further means to evaluate the appropriateness of our actions. We also need to ask:

Is it self-promoting?

Is what you are considering a legitimate pursuit for a Christian? Does it honor God? Does it respect others? Does it challenge you? If we are seeking God's will, we will ask if what we are considering honors God rather than whether it brings honor to ourselves. After all, Paul says that it should be our ambition to lead a quiet life (vs.11)—some commentators summarize that it should be our ambition to have no ambition.

How do we discern places of service that are consistent with our callings whether we receive glory or not? Ask this:

Is it responsible?

Responsible actions come when we consider if our choices create damage or dependence. Paul says to engage

in legitimate work “so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders” (vs. 12). The words remind us that the way that we conduct ourselves bears testimony of the gospel. When ambition causes us to disregard others or take advantage of them for personal benefit, then we damage the testimony of the gospel. God requires us to consider the impact our choices have on others.

Does it create dependence?

The last thing Paul gives us to consider when making a choice is not merely that we walk so as not to create damage to the gospel, but that we ask whether our choice creates dependence. Paul says to engage in legitimate work “so that you will not be dependent on anybody” (vs.12). Paul’s obvious caution is that we should be using our gifts for the good of the gospel, rather than depending on the gifts of others to serve our interests.

As you make decisions, you must answer whether you are a giver or a taker. Will you be applying your gifts to a greater effort or using others for self? This kind of question requires deep searching of the motives of the heart as well as thoughtful consideration of one’s gifts and how they can best be used for God’s purposes. In essence, this gives us the final piece of the puzzle of prudence: Does the choice we are considering provide us the best opportunity to serve the purposes of the gospel rather than to be served?

Do not depend on external signs of which way the birds fly, or neon verses lighting up in the sky. Do not look to subjective feelings of pressure or peace (people can feel peace about a great many unwise decisions). Rather make decisions that are righteous and prudent. Consider first whether the course of action you are considering is within the fence of righteousness, then consider it in the light of the needs of God’s people, the promotion of His gospel, and the nature of your gifts. Such considerations may require much prayer, the counsel of fellow Christians, and deep searching of God’s Word to uncover the motives of our hearts. Still, God is more honored by such dependence on Him than by dependence on chance signs.

What if after all this you still do not know the “right” choice? Then return to the first verse of Thessalonians 4. Paul urges us to walk in the ways that please God “in the Lord Jesus.” These words should be your best comfort. Remember what your position is. You are in Christ Jesus not because you walk into His will, but because as a child of God you are in His care wherever you walk. Trust Him in this. As you make choices in accord with righteousness and prudence, the God who holds you will direct your path. If the step is a mis-step, He will correct it. Do what is right and wise, and trust God to take care of the rest. You are in Him, and whatever road you take, it is still in His care.

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