

**Christ Presbyterian Church**  
**Edina, Minnesota**  
**June 6 & 7, 2015**  
**John Crosby**  
**How Do I Know If I'm Doing God's Will?**  
**Romans 8:28, 12:2; Hebrews 11:8**

Everybody has questions. If you don't have questions, you are no longer alive. Why this and not that? Since Easter we have been trying to dialog, not answer but dialog, about some of the deepest questions in the human condition; that is, we asked you, what are some of the questions you have about God? Or maybe that you don't have, but when somebody asks you, you would be pressed to explain? We received responses from over 60 people and have tried to hack away at some of those. It has been for me a really neat time together because out in the Great Room or through the week it has felt like some of you are thinking about these things, saying, "That made me wonder about this." So together we are trying to discern this world that God put us into.

By far the most popular question was about God's will. There were six or seven different questions about that. The first was, how do I discern God's will? How do God's will and our free will fit together? How do we know God's calling in our own lives? That's what Mark Labberton was talking about last week. Another person, a fairly new believer, asked, how do I know it's God's will versus my will for any decision or action I might take? How do I hear God's voice? How do I know when God is speaking to me? These are questions that the church has grappled with for millennia. I'd like to have us talk about that on a very practical level today, but let me start with three little caveats when we talk about the will of God for us.

The first, frankly, is that preachers have given you a disservice talking about the will of God. We talk about the will of God and we talk out the incident of the burning bush. "When you see the burning bush, go to the burning bush." How many of you have seen a burning bush? Not me. Or we talk about Gideon and the fleece that keeps flipping over and that God will teach you that way. Or, in the Old Testament there is a passage where God speaks in the voice of a donkey. "If you hear a donkey speaking to you, it is probably God." But not many of us have that experience. My sense is that almost always, the will of God comes more quietly. In some ways, all the noise in my life makes it more difficult. If we are to discern what God's call on our lives is, we need to recognize that it is more likely to be a nudge that I need to open my heart to rather than a big, red flag waving, "Over here, stupid. Over here." In some ways that's good because the first thing we need to say about the will of God is that it is not primarily about the decision that you are making. I've got to tell you, I'm not sure that God cares whether you work at Ecolab or Target, whether you get a job at Cargill or leave and start something on your own. I think that what God's primary will for you is "Will you listen to Me and as you listen, will you become the kind of person like My Son Jesus? Will you grow in this ability to love Me and other people?" That's God's primary will. All these secondary things are tactical. Who am I becoming? Caveat No. 1.

Caveat No. 2 is that I think there is often confusion between faith and faithfulness. In the Book of Hebrews it says,

<sup>8</sup> By faith Abraham, when called to go . . . obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going [Hebrews 11:8].

That's making a decision, not sure but going by faith. Faithfulness is different. Faithfulness is that God has told you what to do. "Will you be faithful to obey?" You know the old story you've all heard about the guy whose house is on a river and the river is flooding and he prays "God, save me from this." He goes up on the roof sure that God will save him and a man in a canoe comes by and says, "Jump." He says, "No, God is going to save me." Then a powerboat comes by and says, "Jump." "No, no, God is going to save me." And then a helicopter comes by and says, "Your house is just about to go. Why don't you get out and we'll send a rope down?" "No, no, God is going to save me." His house falls into the river. The guy drowns and he ends up at the pearly gates and says, "God, why didn't You save me?" God says, "You idiot, I sent you a canoe and a motorboat and a helicopter. What did you expect, dancing girls?" Often it's not that we don't know what to do, it's that we are choosing to wait for another answer. We are choosing whether to obey or not. Is it faith helping you understand what to do or is it faithfulness helping you obey what you already know you should do?

Let me give you the third little caveat. It's that we call it faith because it is a mystery. God is not up there guiding you like a rat in a maze. If you turn to the right and it's wrong, zapping you and if you turn to the left, you get closer to the cheese. God has something completely different in mind and it is a mystery. I have found this out personally. When Laura and I were first married, we were associates in Chicago and after four or five years, we had the sense that it was time for us to go do something new. I was in my early thirties at the time. So I started to apply for different pastoral positions around the country. We must have gone to seven or eight or nine of these over the next year and in almost every event, I came out as the No. 2 candidate. The chairperson would call and say, "We really liked you. We really thought it was good but, frankly, you were a little too much change for us. You kept saying, 'If you don't want to grow, if you don't want to change . . . .' We don't want a change and we don't want to grow." And so it was *no over* and over.

Then a friend called and said, "I have a different idea. What if you were to go to the National Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C. and be the executive pastor there until the senior pastor retires? We thought about it. It was a different thing and after a lot of prayer, we decided to do it. It was the hardest two years of our lives. I'm not sure that I was well-fitted to be the No. 2 person at that point in my life. I was way too arrogant. I'm not sure that Washington, D.C. is a great place to raise two infant children. It was tough on our family. It was a church that was in turmoil and I'm not sure I added to calming it down as much as stirring it up. All that is to say, when we ended up coming here following Roger Anderson's tenure, it could not have been clearer. It was literally as if God was sending up fireworks saying, "Over here. Over here. I want you to come here." We had a delightful shift to come here and it is a privilege to have been here for 26 years.

The reason I'm telling you this story is, I think we were just as faithful trying to decide about Washington, D.C. as we were trying to decide about Edina. I don't think God said, "Wrong answer, boom!" I think God taught us things in those two years we never would have learned otherwise. God's will is a mystery because God's heart for you is bigger than you can possibly

imagine. So, all that said, how do you make a God-engaged decision? How do you get God involved in the process?

See if any of these things are happening to you or someone that you love. These are the times when a God-engaged decision is probably coming up. The first one, frankly, is Yogi Berra time. When you come to a fork in the road, take it. Okay, so when you graduate, when you retire, when you are divorced, when someone dies or a relationship is over, you have come to a fork in the road. This is a time where you will be called to make decisions.

Sometimes there are choices that are forced upon us and they are not always bad at all. You have to choose between scholarships at two different schools, something I really never had to worry about. Your entire department at work is closed and you have to decide where to go next. There is an opportunity that arises and you have to decide whether to leave the security of now for this new thing, but a choice is being forced upon you. Is that you? How do you decide?

In the same way, I think there are times the need for decisions comes about because the world changes. For many of us our view of the world changed on 9/11. How we spent our resources, how we served in a larger world, it flipped. In the Bible, Nehemiah asked a casual question of his friend, "How are things going in Jerusalem?" "Well, the place is a wreck," the friend said. "The city is in ruins. It's on fire. The gates are falling down." Nehemiah's heart is racked because his world has changed. He can't go on when he knows what's happening over there. Is that you?

Sometimes you know it's time to make a decision because other people keep telling you it's time to make a decision. Your friends keep going, "Have you thought about . . ." Or "Have you ever considered . . ." Everything that you read seems to be about this decision that you don't want to make. It's like when you want to buy a new car, should I buy that or that, and you keep seeing new cars all over the road. The thoughts keep coming into your mind as if it's time to make a decision.

I think the last one that shows me it's time to make a change or at least a decision is that there is a growing sense of discontentment. Things may look okay from the outside. They may look good, but there is a growing sense of, is this all there is? Am I supposed to do this forever? It's not always a sign that you need to change. Sometimes it is a sign that, yes, more discipline is required. You're tired of learning algebra, but you need to get through the second semester. Other times though it is a sign that a change has to come.

This last month I was asked by somebody whether they should move or stay. I've been asked about whether this person who lost his job should start something on his own or join a new firm. And since it's this time of the year, I've spent time with young people, asking about which school to attend or if they should go to grad school. Each of these calls for times when we need to make a decision. In each of those, I have tried to be not only spirit-oriented and listen for God, but I've tried to be intensely practical. How do you make that kind of decision? I'm really marked by a talk I heard Bob Munger give probably 25 years ago. Munger said that there is a certain harbor in Italy that can only be reached by sailing up a narrow channel between dangerous rocks and shoals. Over the years many ships have been wrecked after they've left the sea on the way to the city, so to guide ships safely into port, huge lights have been mounted on four big poles in the harbor. When the lights are lighted, they show the way in a fairly unique manner.

When the lights are perfectly lined up and seen as one, the ship can safely proceed up the narrow channel. If the pilot sees two or three lights, he knows he's off course and in danger.

God also provides beacons to guide us. What we want to talk about is not about finding the secret to always knowing God's will, but to lining up the lights. Let me give you four harbor lights that will guide you toward Godly decisions. The first should be no surprise here. It is that we believe God speaks to us most clearly through the Word, through the Scriptures. That Scriptures are given to us not like a Ouija board where you go "Ooooooh, Berkeley!" That is not what they're there for and, frankly, the Scriptures are not there to provide an objective standard. "This is how you figure it out." The Scriptures are a story of how God worked in people's lives and how they made God-honoring decisions or God-avoiding decisions. The Scriptures are places you can find wisdom. The Book of James says,

<sup>5</sup> If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you [James 1:5].

And then the Scriptures will show you how to become wise. Wisdom is about making good decisions. It's not about telling you what to do, it's about making good decisions.

<sup>21</sup> Many are the plans in a person's heart,  
but it is the LORD's purpose that prevails [Proverbs 19:21].

If we allow it. Paul says,

<sup>28</sup> And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose [Romans 8:28].

I think, that really means in all things. God works or God is at work in all things. Paul says,

<sup>2</sup> Do not conform 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 [Romans 12:2].

Don't be like everybody else but be transformed by the renewing of your mind and then you will be able to approve and attest to what God's good and pleasing and perfect will is for you. And the passage we used before,

<sup>8</sup> By faith Abraham, when called to go . . . obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going [Hebrews 11:8].

Do you know what the most common verse is that is used at the inauguration of a new president? When the Bible is set to a certain place and opened, the most common verse that is used in those 40-plus inaugurations is from the Book of Proverbs.

<sup>5</sup> Trust in the LORD with all your heart  
and lean not on your own understanding;  
<sup>6</sup> in all your ways submit to him,  
and he will make your paths straight [Proverbs 3:5-6].

The more you know God's Word when you don't need it to make a decision, the more God speaks through His Word in those times of need.

The second of the lights or beacons that you're trying to line up is, I believe, the word *wiring*. I started out calling it circumstances and sometimes the circumstances are helpful. They tell you, "No, you are flat broke. You should not buy the new house." Those are circumstances. That's not a tough decision to make even though I could convince myself, well, if I took this stupid loan . . . . But more often, wiring is not just about the circumstances. God wants to speak to you about how you are made differently from her and differently from him. What passions has God put into your heart, what gifts has God offered you, what is the season of life that you are in? Each of these is important to your wiring and how you will respond to make a decision.

Yesterday afternoon I finished this sermon and was walking down to pick up the printed copy and I walked by our accountant's office. Our part-time accountant was sitting there and I looked at her and we said, "Hi." "Hi." And as I walked away, I was like, "Oh, Lord, thank You that I am not an accountant." The church would be bankrupt in a week. I am sure as I walked away that the accountant was saying, "Oh, God, thank You that I don't have to speak in front of hundreds of people this afternoon." We are wired differently. We are gifted differently. As you consider whether you should do this or not, see how God has wired you. What are your passions? What do you dream of that God would have you lean toward? Does this move you in that direction or not?

Frederick Buechner is an ordained Presbyterian minister, but he was wired to be an author. He was Pulitzer-Prize nominated twice and he talked about this idea of God wiring us. He says, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." Not my place. That's *my* place. Your place will be different. God is calling you to get there. Not just who you *are*, but the you He is creating you to be, who you don't even know that you could be yet. And here, frankly, is where I think God often puts us in trouble and amps up the volume saying, "A choice has to be made here. Make the choice. Don't stay where you are." God is trying to create something new in you and our culture is saying, "No, no, no, no."

Karl Barth once made the observation that "comfort is one of the great and most formidable siren calls of our age." Many of you are very comfortable. What is the most popular chair in America today? Anybody know? I'll give you a hint. It's not called the Worker Boy. It's not called the Risky Boy. It's not called the Adventure Boy. It's called the La-Z-Boy. Some of you actually seem to have known that. People who sit in La-Z-Boys all the time are called couch potatoes and I think the spiritual version of that is pew potatoes. Jesus is looking for people who will get off the pew and into the journey.

If the first light is the Word and the second is how you're wired, the third light that can help you make a decision is a little counterintuitive to American culture. I believe that you should not make a significant decision without talking with somebody else who is a follower of Christ. I think that this often is where guys have trouble. Please don't take this wrong, but I sometimes feel like women talk to everybody about everything. Guys talk to nobody about nothing. I want to make this decision. It's seems to me that a more Godly pattern of making decisions is asking others in the Body of Christ what they see. Too often we don't do this, not only because we want to make the decision, but because we know that the decision we make is maybe not the decision that they would make for us or with us because our pride or our fear is driving us. I think that an unwillingness to submit to the discernment of other people is always a bad sign, but so is asking

other people to make your decisions. That's not what we are talking about here. You're asking for discernment, conversations that guide both of you.

I saw one of these this week. A young man in our community felt like it was time to make a change and a job came to him. He was like, "Wow!" and after some fumbling and talking with his wife, he said, "I think I need to leave here and go over there." He came and talked with one of our folks and this guy said, "Oh, we're going to miss you so much. You are great at what you do. You've got all kinds of friends here but I'm excited for you." Well, all this person heard was, "You really ought to stay" because he was afraid of going, so he came back the next day and said, "I think I've changed my mind. I think I'm going to stay." My friend sat down with him and said, "That's great! Tell me why you think God wants you to stay. What is it about staying here that will make you who you are called to be down the road?" And over the course of that conversation, it became much clearer that his reason for staying was fear of making a huge mistake. At the end of that day, he came back into my room and said, "I'm still leaving." He wouldn't have done that by himself.

Parker Palmer says, "My core religious beliefs include this simple article of faith: the God who gave all of us life wants us to do the same for each other." God gives us life. He wants us to give each other life. Palmer says that if we want to grow, we must do something alien to our culture: we must open up to each other about our inner lives, which is risky stuff in a world that fears the personal and seeks safety in the technical, the distant, the abstract. Who is there in your life, whether you are 15 and in high school, or 85 in retirement? Who is close enough for you to open up to that they might pray with you? That's one of the reasons, by the way, that I believe God calls you to worship in a community like this.

So, the Word of God is the first fixed point, the first beacon light. The second beacon light that needs to line up behind it when you make a decision is your wiring. The third is the counsel of others and I think the fourth light is the work of the Holy Spirit. I'm not going to go all mystical, booga-booga Pentecostal on you, but I'm going to say that Presbyterians are terrified that when they pray, God might actually answer. I think God wants to answer, but that can only happen when I am quiet and I have read the Word and I have looked at how I am made and I have listened to Godly people. I believe that persistent prayer can lead our hearts.

Often in line with these first three lights, sometimes the place you are being led seems to be very different from who you are or very different from what other people think. It's rare, but it may happen. That may be the Holy Spirit, but it will never be that the Spirit will lead you against what God has said in His Word. "No, you are not being called by God to leave Him because you find *him* much more attentive to you." That is not God, but there are many places where the Holy Spirit will speak to you in unusual or new ways. That's why often this is such an emotional process, this making a decision, because I don't feel peace about the decision that I am making. Of course, you don't feel peace. It's not over. You haven't taken these three steps so you can look back and say, "Oh, I understand."

I love a brother of mine, John Ortberg. He is a friend and he has preached here. He's written some great books. His latest book is about knowing the will of God and I have not read it. The reason I have not read it is that I didn't want to have you hear what John Ortberg thinks the will of God is instead of what I think. And so I have prayed and read and studied and just yesterday when this sermon was done, I finally agreed with my wife that it was time to read Ortberg's

book. This should be your summer book. Go to Pathways and write your name down and they will get you a copy of *All the Places to Go . . . How Will You Know?* by John Ortberg.

It's a great book. It really is. My wife has read this copy here and the reason you can tell it's my wife's copy is because every single sentence in the book is underlined. I don't think Ortberg is that smart and I don't think he is that good-looking, but my wife apparently does. It's all underlined. "Oh, this is how God will tell you." I got to page 45 yesterday afternoon and read a whole page that was not underlined. Ortberg says,

A few months into our marriage, while I was still in grad school, I got a phone call telling me I was being offered a fellowship to study overseas for a year. I told [my new wife] Nancy and then asked a series of questions. Would the classes count toward my degree? (No.) Would it take me longer to graduate if we went? (Yes.) Would there be enough money to travel on? (No.) Would anyone at the school be waiting for us? (No.) Would Nancy have to work? (Yes. As a maid.)

I hung up the phone thinking Nancy and I had a lot of pros and cons to weigh about this decision. But when I went in to talk with her about the details, I found that she had already packed.

That's when I realized I was married to a woman of the open door. Her default is set to yes.

I am stunned that my wife Laura did not think this was a good illustration. I need to ask her about that. John finishes with this quote. He says,

God is doing something magnificent in this world [through us]. When a door is opened, count the costs, weigh the pros and cons, get wise counsel, look as far down the road as you can. But in your deepest heart, in its most secret place, have a tiny bias in the direction of yes. Cultivate a *willingness* to charge through open doors even if it's not this particular door.

And you will find God on the other side. Maybe this is not the answer you wanted. Maybe it's not success, but you will find the God who loves you walking through with you.

*The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.*