

How To Live Within The Will Of God

Have you ever struggled over knowing the **will of God** for your life? Perhaps in a particular matter, where you were seeking to know just exactly what God wanted you to do? Or maybe you were struggling because you were afraid you did know God's will and it was very different from your own will. That reminds me of a story told some time back by a man who was ministering to college students. He said that he was always reluctant to give himself totally to God because he was afraid that if he promised to do God's will, God would send him to Africa as a missionary. But then he said, "*You know those three years in Africa weren't bad at all!*"

Today we are going to look at how Paul viewed and responded to the **will of God** in his life as we look at his role as a preacher.

Hopefully, you'll remember that last week we considered Paul's role as a priest of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles. In his priestly role he was winning Gentiles to faith and then offering them up to God as an act of worship. Let's begin reading in Romans 15:14 to get a little review and then continue on through verse 21:

14 I am fully convinced, dear brothers and sisters, that you are full of goodness. You know these things so well that you are able to teach others all about them.

15 Even so, I have been bold enough to emphasize some of these points, knowing that all you need is this reminder from me. For I am, by God's grace,

16 a special messenger from Christ Jesus to you Gentiles. I bring you the Good News and offer you up as a fragrant sacrifice to God so that you might be pure and pleasing to him by the Holy Spirit.

17 So it is right for me to be enthusiastic about all Christ Jesus has done through me in my service to God.

18 I dare not boast of anything else. I have brought the Gentiles to God by my message and by the way I lived before them.

19 I have won them over by the miracles done through me as signs from God—all by the power of God's Spirit. In this way, I have fully presented the Good News of Christ all the way from Jerusalem clear over into Illyricum.

20 My ambition has always been to preach the Good News where the name of Christ has never been heard, rather than where a church has already been started by someone else.

21 I have been following the plan spoken of in the Scriptures, where it says, "Those who have never been told about him will see, and those who have never heard of him will understand."

The last part of verse 21 is a direct quote from the prophet Isaiah in Isaiah 52:15.

Beginning in verse 17 Paul is saying that he will boast about those things done by Jesus Christ through him. Paul is not boasting about what he himself has done but rather what Christ has done. Christ only used Paul as his earthly messenger. Godly pride is a legitimate pride. Personal pride is not a legitimate pride. In 1 Corinthians 1:31, Paul wrote:

*31 As the Scriptures say, "The person who wishes to boast should **boast only of what the Lord has done.**"*

Then in 2 Corinthians 10:17:

17 As the Scriptures say, "The person who wishes to boast should boast only of what the Lord has done."

We have every right to boast about the things God has done. The preacher has no right to boast about himself because nothing is done of eternal consequence through human effort, not even the human strength of a called and anointed apostle. But in the things which pertain to God, in the things accomplished by the power of the Lord Jesus Christ, there is reason to boast. Paul's boast was always about what Christ had done and what God was able to do by His power through the weakness of Paul. No brush ever took credit for a great painting. No bow ever took credit for a beautiful violin virtuoso solo. Nor should any human being take credit for what God does. Then in verses 18 and 19 Paul gives five virtues of a master preacher:

- 1) **Humility:** Paul claimed nothing except what Christ had done through him.
- 2) **Faithfulness:** Paul preached obedience to God.
- 3) **Authenticity:** Paul had personal integrity; he was genuine. He practiced what he preached.
- 4) **Power:** His work was given divine affirmation by mighty signs and wonders.
- 5) **Thoroughness:** His work is completely fulfilled. Paul preached everywhere the Lord sent him.

Paul's mission was to reach as many people as possible for Christ. In Romans 15:20 and 21 we also see Paul the **pioneer**. Let's read those two verses again:

20 My ambition has always been to preach the Good News where the name of Christ has never been heard, rather than where a church has already been started by someone else.

21 I have been following the plan spoken of in the Scriptures, where it says, "Those who have never been told about him will see, and those who have never heard of him will understand."

Paul has a call to the un-reached people of the world. Paul is a pioneer, a trail blazer, a missionary, a church planter. Rome is only a stopping off place for Paul who intends to

go on to Spain where the Gospel has never been preached. We all need to do some pioneering work, even if it's only right here in Wheaton.

Now we're going to move along to examine Romans 15:22-33, a section that deals with **ministry within the will of God**. When you teach the Bible, you sometimes find that a passage is very explicit in what it says. The meaning is very clear. There are other passages that speak to us implicitly (something implied but not stated clearly). They don't just give us clear facts but they speak with an underlying message that is behind the facts that are given. At first reading it can seem like a lot of inconsequential background material. This passage is like that. Let's read it through and then we'll study it. Romans 15:22-33:

22 In fact, my visit to you has been delayed so long because I have been preaching in these places.

23 But now I have finished my work in these regions, and after all these long years of waiting, I am eager to visit you.

*24 **I am planning to go to Spain**, and when I do, I will stop off in Rome. And after I have enjoyed your fellowship for a little while, you can send me on my way again.*

25 But before I come, I must go down to Jerusalem to take a gift to the Christians there.

26 For you see, the believers in Greece have eagerly taken up an offering for the Christians in Jerusalem, who are going through such hard times.

27 They were very glad to do this because they feel they owe a real debt to them. Since the Gentiles received the wonderful spiritual blessings of the Good News from the Jewish Christians, they feel the least they can do in return is help them financially.

28 As soon as I have delivered this money and completed this good deed of theirs, I will come to see you on my way to Spain.

29 And I am sure that when I come, Christ will give me a great blessing for you.

30 Dear brothers and sisters, I urge you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me. Do this because of your love for me, given to you by the Holy Spirit.

31 Pray that I will be rescued from those in Judea who refuse to obey God. Pray also that the Christians there will be willing to accept the donation I am bringing them.

32 Then, by the will of God, I will be able to come to you with a happy heart, and we will be an encouragement to each other.

33 And now may God, who gives us his peace, be with you all. Amen.

At first glance this doesn't really seem to be a life changing passage. It looks like a whole lot of data about Paul's plans. Underlying what we see here on the surface is a very deep and profound truth that is given in verse 32. Let's take the phrase *by the will of God* and spread its implications over the whole passage. You see in this passage the attitudes, perceptions, and viewpoints of a man who functions within the will of God. Studying this

passage more closely we begin to see the things that characterize Paul's ministry in the will of God.

Remember that Paul has discussed something of his personal ministry in the prior passage (verses 14-21). Paul sees himself as a priest offering up to God a sacrifice of redeemed Gentiles, which God has used him to reach. He sees himself as a prophet whose task it is to proclaim the saving Gospel of Christ in every place the Lord sends him. He sees himself as a pioneer whose desire is to serve in areas where the message has never been heard.

Paul did everything under what he believed to be the direction of the will of God. This should be the ruling principle in the life of any person and in the pattern and direction of any ministry.

To see just how much Paul was committed to functioning within the will of God, let's turn to his sermon at Antioch in Pisidia in Acts 13. Immediately after Paul was sent from the church at Antioch to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles, we see his commitment to the will of God by first making some statements about David. Acts 13:22:

22 But God removed Saul from the kingship and replaced him with David, a man about whom God said, 'David son of Jesse is a man after my own heart, for he will do everything I want him to.

Then down in verse 36, we read:

After David had served his generation according to the will of God, he died and was buried, and his body decayed.

Twice here, in verse 22 and in verse 36, Paul marks David as **one who did the will of God**. And in between those two statements, in verses 22-34, Paul points out in detail **how Christ's life and ministry were according to the will and purpose of God**. That then becomes a pattern for Paul's own ministry. Even as Paul begins to write his epistle to the Romans, he says this, in Romans 1:10 (NAS):

10 always in my prayers making request, if perhaps now at last by the will of God I may succeed in coming to you.

Over in Romans 8:27 Paul is speaking of how the Holy Spirit prays for us:

27 And the Father who knows all hearts knows what the Spirit is saying, for the Spirit pleads for us believers in harmony with God's own will.

You might remember the familiar passage in Romans 12:2 (NRSV):

2 Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing

of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.

Paul saw the importance of the will of God in David's life as he preached. Then in his own ministry in writing to the Romans, **Paul emphasizes how important it is to know, discern, and be in the will of God.**

We see throughout Paul's letters in the New Testament his constant awareness of the significance of God's will in his life. For instance, as Paul begins the epistle to the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 1:1, he writes:

1 This letter is from Paul, chosen by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus.

Paul makes the same reference in 2 Corinthians 1:1, Ephesians 1:1, Colossians 1:1, and in 2 Timothy 1:1 it's the same thing. Paul was a man whose primary preoccupation in his ministry was to do the will of God. Now let's go back for just a moment to the book of Acts, chapters 21 and 22. In Acts 21:13 Paul reacts to the concern of certain believers who believe that if Paul continues on his journey to Jerusalem he's going to suffer greatly. In fact a prophet in verse 10 by the name of Agabus makes a prediction that Paul will be imprisoned. So in verse 12 they beg him not to go to Jerusalem. Then in Acts 21:13:

13 But he (Paul)¹ said, "Why all this weeping? You are breaking my heart! For I am ready not only to be jailed at Jerusalem but also to die for the sake of the Lord Jesus."

14 When it was clear that we couldn't persuade him, we gave up and said, "The will of the Lord be done."

In other words Paul convinced them of this very important principle. Then in chapter 22:14, when Paul gives his testimony in his defense before this mob of people in Jerusalem who did try to kill him, he remembers his encounter with Ananias in Damascus at the time of his conversion and quotes Ananias when he says:

14 "Then he told me, 'The God of our ancestors has chosen you (referring to Paul)² to know his will.'

Paul's ministry was centered in the will of God. Paul did nothing in ministry that was not within the will of God. I can't begin to tell you how significant that knowledge is in the ministry of a servant of Christ. If you can live with confidence that you are living within the will of God, you will be at peace. Paul was committed to this kind of life. That has to be the overriding attitude in all effective Christian service.

¹ Parentheses added.

² Parentheses added.

Now what are the results of functioning within the will of God? Let's go back to Romans 15. Because Paul functioned within the will of God, he knew spiritual triumph. Because he functioned within the will of God, he could praise God in verses 17 and 18 for the things that Christ had done through Paul, making the Gentiles obedient in word and deed. By his testimony of life and ministry, God had used Paul to bring about Gentile salvation. So the message here is obvious. **When we serve within the will of God it leads to spiritual triumph.**

Also because Paul was within the will of God he knew supernatural power. In Romans 15:19 we see that Paul saw mighty signs and wonders by the power of the Spirit of God. Living within the will of God put Paul in a place of triumph and a place of power. Finally it put him in a place of fulfillment. At the end of verse 19, Paul says he has fully preached. He accomplished his mission and knew the feeling of satisfaction. He knew he had done what God wanted him to do. What a wonderful thing to know. What a great way to come to the end of your life and be ready to go on into glory and reward. It sure beats coming to the end of your life and saying to God, *"I'm not sure what you wanted me to do."* Or to have to say to God, *"I know I didn't do what you wanted me to do."* But Paul was a man who functioned within the will of God, and you see the results: spiritual triumph, supernatural power, and satisfaction.

What are the elements in Paul's life that lead him to such thrilling results? Well, there are some key words in this passage from Romans 15:22-33 and they all start with "p", so you should be able to remember them easily.

People who function within the will of God know:

1) Precision

This word probably reminds you of a watch. It functions precisely, is on time, and without error. Anyone who functions in ministry within the will of God will know precision. I know we've read these two verses a couple of times already, but please indulge me as we read them again in light of this topic. Romans 15:20,21:

20 My ambition has always been to preach the Good News where the name of Christ has never been heard, rather than where a church has already been started by someone else.

21 I have been following the plan spoken of in the Scriptures, where it says, "Those who have never been told about him will see, and those who have never heard of him will understand."

Paul says that his calling was to places where they didn't know about Christ. **So we see a precision in Paul's ministry.** He understood his calling from the Lord. He understood where his giftedness was for ministry. He understood exactly what he was to do. He would never glory in anything other than Christ and what Christ had brought about through him in the precise ministry that Christ had given to Paul. Any effective servant of the Lord is one that has a clear perspective on the purpose of God for their life. There are so many people who do a little bit of a whole lot of stuff and never really find that

calling, giftedness, and unique place with precision where they can most efficiently and effectively maximize the calling of God in their life.

The best illustration of this is Jesus Himself. He focused His ministry in a tiny little country and never traveled more than two hundred miles away from home. In fact, look what Jesus said in John 5:30:

30 But I do nothing without consulting the Father. I judge as I am told. And my judgment is absolutely just, because it is according to the will of God who sent me; it is not merely my own.

Jesus didn't do anything unless the Father told Him to do it. In John 7:30 and John 8:20 we see that Jesus repeated that His time had not yet come. Jesus had a tremendous sense of timing. He had a precise plan and a specific time frame in which to accomplish the will of the Father for His life. Jesus also had a definite focus regarding the people to which he was sent to minister. He said He had come for the lost sheep of the house of Israel (Matthew 10:6). Further, He spent the majority of His three-year ministry working with only twelve apostles. I believe we would have to categorize this lifestyle as an economy of effort because He was totally in touch with what God the Father wanted. And I further believe that **Paul was also constantly seeking and following God's will and God's plan.**

Paul had a sense of direction from God in his ministry. He reveals this back in Acts 20 in a discussion with the Ephesian elders at Miletus. Paul is very committed to the task God has given him. Acts 20:22-27:

*22 "And now I am going to Jerusalem, **drawn there irresistibly by the Holy Spirit**, not knowing what awaits me,
23 except that the Holy Spirit has told me in city after city that jail and suffering lie ahead.
24 But my life is worth nothing unless I use it for doing the work assigned me by the Lord Jesus—the work of telling others the Good News about God's wonderful kindness and love.
25 "And now I know that none of you to whom I have preached the Kingdom will ever see me again.
26 Let me say plainly that I have been faithful. No one's damnation can be blamed on me,
27 for I didn't shrink from declaring all that God wants for you.*

Paul knew God's precision. Do you remember the words of John Knox? He said, "Give me Scotland or I die!" He knew exactly what God had laid upon his heart. Any successful servant of God realizes that success will come when he/she understands their calling, gifts, and opportunities in line with clear goals. If you don't have such an understanding you need to spend some more time on your knees seeking it. Realize also that it might change as life goes on. But whatever it turns out to be, function within it with great commitment and precision.

There is an important lesson in all of this and that is that neither Paul nor Jesus ever felt that they had to do everything in the world that could possibly be done. Rather they sought to function within limits consistent with the Word of God. So we only need to ask one question as we go through life, and that question is: *“Is this the will of God?”* And I can't help but believe that if God has a will for you, He wants you to know what it is. Therefore, what do you think would be a wise course of action? Simple enough; ask Him; He'll tell you. And if you don't feel you're getting an answer it won't be because God isn't telling you. It will be because your receiver is on the wrong frequency. The message is going out; your receiver isn't right. Therefore, our first key word for people who function within the will of God is **precision**. The second key word is:

2) Providence

Paul's ministry was to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles. That was his calling. But look what he says in Romans 15:22:

22 In fact, my visit to you has been delayed so long because I have been preaching in these places.

Paul says he's been so busy doing what God has called him to do and that is the reason he was delayed in coming to Rome. This is providence. By moving Paul here and moving him there, God had providentially controlled his life. God controls us and He controls human history in basically one of two ways:

- 1) Through miracles, which are a direct interruption of the natural laws of the universe, or
- 2) By controlling all things in the natural course of events. This of course is how God primarily works.

Paul has been under the controlling elements of providence, a series of things over which he had no control. It's as if the Lord has just made all this happen. Let's turn to Acts 16 to get a better idea of how providence might work. Acts 16:6 NRSV:

6 They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia.

Now how did the Holy Spirit prevent Paul from going into Asia? It doesn't say. It doesn't say a miracle occurred. It doesn't say they heard a voice out of Heaven. Somehow the Holy Spirit didn't let them go into Asia. Now let's look at verses 7-10 NRSV:

*7 When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them;
8 so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas.
9 During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, “Come over to Macedonia and help us.”
10 When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to*

Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

Here we see God controlling circumstances to bring about His own will. One of the classic illustrations in the Old Testament involves Joseph, who when sold into slavery by his brothers, becomes his brothers' savior. Later when the famine comes to Egypt, his brothers go down to get food and by that time Joseph is the prime minister and gives them food. Another classic Old Testament illustration is Esther, who because she is so beautiful is chosen by the king for his queen. When a decree goes out to slaughter all of her people she is in a vital position as queen of the land and is thereby able to save her people from total destruction. So God, by controlling all the elements of history, brought about His will.

Paul knows what it's like to function within the realm of God's providence. Paul knows and we should know that God will order everything the way He wants it to be done. We may think an event that prevents us from getting somewhere or that causes us to be late will result in a disaster. Don't be so sure. God may have something in mind that you haven't a clue about. Don't worry about things you have no control over. Simply trust in God's providence and know that no matter what happens in this world, everything is as God wants it. Now let's close this morning with a third key word for people who function within the will of God and that word is:

3) Planning

While it's wonderful to trust God's providence, that is no excuse for poor planning. In fact you may find this difficult to accept initially, but you'll never really experience the providence of God unless you've got some plans for God to work on. Romans 15:23,24:

23 But now I have finished my work in these regions, and after all these long years of waiting, I am eager to visit you.

24 I am planning to go to Spain, and when I do, I will stop off in Rome. And after I have enjoyed your fellowship for a little while, you can send me on my way again.

Waiting on the providence of God does not eliminate planning. Paul had plans. They may have been hindered, altered, and delayed but he still had a plan. His plan may have been altered occasionally by God's providence, but that doesn't mean planning isn't necessary. I believe in the leading of the Holy Spirit, but I also know that effective ministry just doesn't happen without careful **planning and prayer**. Proverbs 16:9:

9 We can make our plans, but the Lord determines our steps.

And **the key** for being confident that the Lord will determine our steps is to **prayerfully make our plans**. Let's look a few verses earlier in Proverbs 16. Proverbs 16:3 (NKJ):

Commit your works to the LORD, and your thoughts will be established.

The Amplified Bible makes this verse especially clear:

Roll your works upon the Lord—commit and trust them wholly to Him; [He will cause your thoughts to become agreeable to His will, and] so shall your plans be established and succeed.

Things happen because we plan. So Paul reveals his plan in Romans 15:23, 24. His work in this area is completed and it is time to move on. Paul thinks it is now God's will for him to move on to Spain and, according to the verb structure here in the original Greek, he's asking the Roman church for their support in such a missionary journey. He's looking for the Roman church to provide escorts and supplies for the journey. But Paul never got to Spain. God planned for him to travel in that direction but it was not God's actual destination for him. Sometimes God seems to lead us in one direction, even though that is not where He eventually wants us to be. He knows, however, that if we start in that direction we will then be in the place where He can redirect us along the path He really wants us to take.

So Paul wanted to establish himself doctrinally with the Romans. That's primarily the reason for his writing this letter to them. He wanted to establish himself with them personally and with fellowship and get their support.

Let me ask you something. Do you make any plans? Do you lean on the providence of God? Do you function in a ministry with precision? Those are characteristics of ministry within the will of God. We'll look at several more of these qualities next week.