

HOW TO KNOW THE WILL OF GOD.

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Thirty-three years ago a lithe and well-dressed Scotchman of middle age was visiting American universities and conferences. He was making public addresses and holding private interviews everywhere he went. He was a scientist of considerable reputation, and he was one of the first men to see his way through the problem of adopting a modern viewpoint toward history and science while keeping hold of a vital and personal evangelical Christianity. That man's name was Henry Drummond. They were widely different, but he was a close and understanding friend of D. L. Moody's and they worked together here, as they had worked together in England when Mr. Moody had been there years before.

Henry Drummond was a marvelous combination of analyst and partisan, scientist and enthusiast, investigator and propagandist. To many men is it given to be onlookers of life, who dissect it and anatomize it, and to many more is it given to throw themselves headlong into the thick of life as participants. Henry Drummond mixed those two elements in his personality in such a way as to make him of peculiar service to our generation. He was possessed of a considerable knowledge of science, and he loved the search for truth in scientific regions. But he loved men as well as truth, and the passion of his life was the winning of young men for Christ; He knew intimately well the hearts of thousands of men. I do not much listen to the pronouncements of men whose minds smell of books when they come to practical matters of religion; for I do not trust them unless they also know life. Henry Drummond knew life, and lived it richly.

Now anyone who knows much about people spiritually comes to feel, sooner or later, that the greatest problem any of us face is the problem of what we shall do about the will of God. When we come to believe in God at all, we come to believe in him as having something definite to say about our lives. To say that we believe in the fact of the will of God is only to believe in God in the concrete. As you cannot pray without words, so you cannot imagine God apart from his desires which touch us. There is at the heart of religion this marriage between the mystical and the moral. Henry Drummond, with inerrant insight, went often into this great problem. It was the love of his life to do the will of God. He was no glib and facile interpreter of what it was. He spent long hours searching his Bible for light on the question, and when he had finished his study, this scholar seeking a truth of metaphysics, this devotee Christian trying to know the heart and mind of his God, he wrote down in the fly-leaf of his Bible these eight points:

1. Pray
2. Think
3. Talk to wise people, but do not regard their decision as final.
4. Beware of the bias of your own will, but do not be too much afraid of it. (God never unnecessarily thwarts a man's nature and likings, and it is a mistake to think that his will is in the line of the disagreeable.)
5. Meantime, do the next thing, for doing God's will in small things is the best preparation for knowing it in great things.
6. When decision and action are necessary, go ahead.
7. Never reconsider your decision when it is finally acted upon, and
8. You will probably not find out till afterwards, perhaps long afterwards, that you were led at all.

Let me take these steps one at a time, and embroider them a little in detail, reminding you first that I am not sure I have in everything caught the sense of Henry Drummond, and that I am packing my own meaning into his phrases!

1. Pray!

It is a common thing to run to God in petulant and frantic demand, asking him to tell us what to do. This may be the sudden reversal of a life of self-seeking and self-guidance, and it is not to be wondered at if not much guidance comes from him. What we often seek is his approval, not his will.

When we come in great honesty, having put our own wills behind us, seeking candidly the mind of the Lord, it is generally rather plain sailing. A mood or disposition comes upon us with light in it, or a direct thought flits across our mind with illumination. These experiences are too common amongst Christians for any of you to pooh-pooh them until you have tried honestly. But when we come only in curiosity, merely wondering what God might like us to do, quite different is the result. We get nowhere. Prayer is a fog, we rise from our knees anxious and fretful and in a stew. To find God's will in prayer demands a colossal honesty in our minds.

A man recently disputed my use of the word honesty in this connection: he said willingness and unselfishness I might use, but honesty implied dishonesty in coming to God with our minds made up. Yet this is precisely what we are when we prejudice the will of God by trying to twist it into our own will: we are not honest with facts, especially the great fact that God's plan may not be our plan. "My thoughts are not your thoughts" is true more often than we care to remember. So that to pray for God's will to be revealed we must be ready and willing to have it revealed, and come to him with an open mind.

There is in the city of New York the president of a great company. He is a devoted Christian, and it has been his practice to bring up his sons to attend church regularly on Sunday mornings till they are 21: after that they are free to choose for themselves.

One Sunday one of his sons came to him and said: "Father, there is a house party over in Morristown today, and if you don't mind, I shall take the car and go over."

The father said: "Yes, son, you can go under one condition."

"What is that?" the son asked.

"That you will go upstairs and talk to God about it for fifteen minutes."

And the son said: "Well, Dad, I guess I won't go."

That boy had learned already that in the realized presence of God one sees things as they really are, if one is only honest and willing to see them.

Yet I recall a friend of mine speaking of his desire to know what he ought to do with his life. I asked if he had prayed about it. He said that he had, and he asked God what to do, but that if God had said certain things he would not have been willing to do them. That is not prayer: it is a kind of blasphemy instead. It points the truth that no man can see the will of God who is not willing to see it.

One of Drummond's favorite verses in this connection was St. John 7.17, "If any man willeth to do his will, he shall know." Wrapped up in that little verse there lies more empirical spiritual experience than almost anywhere else I know.

This, then, is the first guide, to pray.

2. Think!

There is a moral obligation to be as intelligent as you can. Turn over the possibilities in your mind! Face all the facts you can find, honestly and fearlessly! I am not afraid of too much thought in religion: I am afraid of too little of it. It is not sound reasoning which steals men's

religion: it is half-baked rationalizing. Some people use their brains to convince themselves they ought to do what they want to do. Jesus says, against this kind of a thing, "Judge not according to appearance, but judge righteous judgment!"

It may be a good thing to put down the pros and cons in two written columns, and weigh one against the other. If the decision concerns your life work, face the needs of the world frankly, as well as your own qualifications! We are apt to be too subjective in some of these questions. I believe we do well to look out on the world, and ask what it is which that world needs most, and then ask ourselves how we can best supply that need, rather than to turn in upon ourselves and ask what riches and talents lie hidden within us which we must find a way to turn loose upon the world. Look out, and assemble all the facts you can! There is nothing the matter with using human brains so long as an honest character lies behind them.

But this is an age of more self-deception, under the guise of intellectual honesty, than any I know about. Remember, when all is said and done, that God may communicate his wish to you, and knock your thinking end-wise. To be thoroughly intellectually honest, you will consider as the greatest factor of all the will of God.

3. Talk to wise people, but do not regard their decision as final!

That is, don't expect them to make up your mind for you! Consult them for what they are worth, but make the decision your own!

There are always a lot of people in the world who like to talk to ministers, as if we knew it all: they run to us to settle things they ought to be close enough to God to settle for themselves. And we are always in danger of priding ourselves upon our influence, and handing out packages of advice, when as a matter of fact we ought to be dealing with a larger issue, the issue of their surrender to God's will, and their own search for what it is. Now don't discuss this with just anybody you happen to think about, but with people who love God and his will and are themselves putting the kingdom of heaven first!

A friend of mine went to a business man in Philadelphia who had asked him to come into business with him. When he told him he had decided for the ministry, and asked what he thought of it, the business man said:

"You d---- f----!"

Now a man like that forfeits his right ever to advise anybody. A man who will drench a young man's aspirations with that kind of materialistic cold water is not fit to make suggestions to a pig. Go to really wise people, wise with God's wisdom: he will often speak to you through them, as generally he does speak through others! But let this talk be for a clearing of the issue, not for a settlement of it. What they say to you is valid only in so far as it rings a bell in your own heart.

4. Beware of the bias of your own will but do not be too much afraid of it! (God never unnecessarily thwarts a man's nature and likings, and it is a mistake to think that his will is in the line of the disagreeable.)

Drummond was talking to Scotchmen with consciences a yard long when he added to his warning, "Beware of the bias of your own will," the balance of "but do not be too much afraid of it." I think the first half of it is probably more applicable to us. We are not likely to err on the side of interpreting God's will hardly, but softly. When you consult God and your mind is already partially made up, you need seriously to be aware of that bias, for it will throw out all the calculations. Left to ourselves, we are likely to please ourselves. Erdman Harris says that the great American indoor sport is kidding one's self.

And yet we need the postscript too, "Do not be too much afraid of it! God never unnecessarily thwarts a man's nature and likings, and it is a mistake to think that his will is in the line of the

disagreeable." It is a mistake, and a great one. I heard a woman say within a week that whatever was the hardest thing to do was probably God's will: but I do not believe that. Some people think that God goes around hunting up hard and unhappy jobs, then trailing them down and loading the jobs off on them. To make God that kind of a supernatural taskmaster is to be un-Christian in our thought of him. There are hard jobs to be done, and somebody has got to do them, but I feel sure that God made us for a particular piece of work, and that we shall never be fully happy until we find that work. You may not think it looks like you would enjoy it, but if it is his place you will, and you will never really be happy anywhere else.

5. Meantime, do the next thing, for doing God's will in small things is the best preparation for knowing it in great things!

Some are so preoccupied with the obvious that they never get above it to take a look at the whole, but some also are so busy with the abstract they never see the concrete, nor complete the ordinary duty which stares them in the face. A man who is honestly living up to the light he has today will have more light tomorrow, when he needs it.

Sometimes God makes us wait for the full emergence of his plan. If we have been faithful in a few things, he will make us master of many things, revealing as much truth as we can live up to. I know a man in business in downtown New York. He has been soundly changed in his own life, and he loves to bring Christ into the lives of men. He does not know whether God wants him to go into the ministry or not. Meanwhile he is doing a fine job in an insurance office, and working there until he is guided to go elsewhere. There is an enormous amount of common sense about real religion which we miss sometimes because it is not exactly the common sense of the world at large.

6. When decision and action are necessary, go ahead!

Go ahead fearlessly! God will give you for each step as much light as you really need, and perhaps no more. You may see from here to the next corner, and there the path seems to turn down into the dark. Go that far, and more light will come! Do not wait till you see light on all the road before you!

Most of us never do. The Greeks used to wear lanterns on their shoes. These would throw light about three feet ahead of them, and they had to take one more step to get three feet more of light. So it is with finding the will of God. You may not see all the sides of a question of importance, yet you must decide it. God will give you enough light. Do not rush him or the situation, but when you must, let the hammer fall, act on all the light you have, and you will make no mistake! The more you trust God in critical situations, the more you will learn that you can trust him, and that if you will throw the onus of decision off yourself and on to him, giving him only a ready and obedient will, you will be amazed at the way things work out for you.

7. Never reconsider your decision when it is finally acted upon!

That is of immense importance. Every thoughtful person, every conscientious person, wonders again and again about an old decision; wants to go back and tear it up by the roots and ask again why it was ever made. Some people do that about marriage. Many do it about their life's work. They acted in all good faith at the time, but later they question their own decision. It is a fatal thing to do. Now if the decision was made selfishly, we may have to make the best of a bad bargain; remembering that God has always a substitute will which goes into the game when the first-string will is put out. But if they acted under God so far as they understood, it was the best they could do. If trial and difficulty have come since, they were meant to have their place.

We should spend our lives on regrets, ----- and many do so spend them, -----if we spent much time reconsidering decisions that have been already acted upon. Until a decision is acted upon, reconsider as much as you like, but afterwards go forward and banish fear!

8. You will not find out till afterwards, perhaps long afterwards, that you were led at all!

I should not put so much of an interval as Drummond implies, for I believe that we often know we acted rightly by a quick sense of being right, and sometimes by the manifest outworking of God's plan which shows itself quickly. Yet there is an immense truth here. He is talking about totals and broad outlines, and one finds that the great compensation for the steady fleeing away of the years is a larger and longer look at one's own life, and a clearer view of the path by which he has come. One sees here just the right person coming across our path to point a truth, or to enlarge a horizon. There we came across that great book that turned us upward. In another place a great sorrow made us tender and kinder.

The map of the will of God is not like the track of a railway stretching away before us, but rather like the wake of a ship lying white behind us. We see best how clear that path is as we look back upon it over a long period of time.

I ask you today to look back across your own life,----not somebody else's, for we never know all the factors anywhere but in our own,----but look at your own life, and see whether, if you have acted according to your best judgment, and interpreted events with a will to find God's purpose, things have not marvelously worked together for good!

But we end where we began. Prayer is the heart of the discovery of the will of God. I will defend it against all comers that something happens when a man lays his life open before God, and asks him to make known his will, which cannot happen by any amount of uninspired thought or human direction. We see into the heart of things in prayer like that.

But that kind of prayer is impossible without radical and basic surrender to the will of God first. "If any man willeth to do his will,"----this means no grudging concession to God, but whole-hearted allegiance and the cooperation of one's whole self,----"he shall know."

The man who knows God's will is the man who loves it. The man who finds out what God wants is the man who cares what God wants, who feels upon him the same kind of burdens God feels and carries. If God can count on you, he can commit his secrets to you. We have got to get on God's side before it is any use to ask what is God's plan.

As Drummond finished his address in Appleton Chapel at Harvard thirty-three years ago, he said:

"Above all things, do not touch Christianity unless you are willing to seek the kingdom of God first! I promise you a miserable existence if you seek it second."

That is true. And the matter with many who call themselves Christians, and have never found any thrill and power in their religion, lies just there: they are not seeking the kingdom first. When you do come out on that side with all your heart, and seek the kingdom first, I can promise you not a miserable existence, but the only thing that satisfies on this side of eternity. It is the only thing that can ever keep you from being miserable, and those nearest to you. I say to you that it will be the tragedy of your life to miss the will of God, and the standing and crowning success of your life to find it. There is no other success than to do what God wants you to do.

"Not everyone that saith unto me, Lord, Lord! shall enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he that doeth the will of my Father who is in heaven." Across the grave of that great man of God yonder on Round Top it is written, "He that doeth the will of God abideth forever." God give us the grace to ask, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?"

O God, who in thy love for us dost plan for us a way far better than our own, grant us to desire thy will above all things; and desiring it, to seek it; and seeking it, to find it; and finding it, to serve thee faithfully and to make thee known to men! Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

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