

Learning God's Will

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Introduction.

As we saw last week, if we actually open the Bible and look at what God is saying to us, we simply can't take seriously the idea that the Scripture is just a big love letter. The very language in which the word is written is the language of authority. God is the one in authority, and we are the ones under authority. God doesn't make suggestions or helpful hints. He issues commands, and just as is true of any earthly king or government, we disobey Him at our peril.

So, if God has commanded us to do things, and He is going to hold us accountable for whether we do them or not, how do we figure out just what it is that He wants us to do? Do we hear a little voice in our head that instructs us in the divine will? If we do, that's probably a sign that we need to get our medication changed. We see the actual possible sources of authority listed in Ephesians 3:3-5. All authority, of course, begins with Jesus. The entire Christian faith is based upon the revelation of His mystery. According to Paul's words here, the recipients of that revelation were the apostles and the prophets, who were guided by the Holy Spirit in what to reveal to the rest of mankind. Those apostles and prophets spoke directly, but they also wrote down God's will so that those who read it could understand it.

That gives us, then, three possible sources of authority: Jesus, His apostles and prophets, and the written word. Typically, religious people today recognize that Jesus no longer speaks directly to us. Some do claim to be the Lord, but that's usually addressed as a mental-health question rather than a spiritual question. The other two, though, are very much with us. All kinds of people claim to be apostles, prophets, or the successors of the apostles and prophets. Is that true? Are there other sources of authority beyond the word? Let's look at this as we study learning God's will.

Jesus and the Apostles.

We must begin by looking at how we learn God's will **THROUGH JESUS**. We see His authority in Matthew 28:18. Even during His ministry, Jesus was known as someone who taught with authority, unlike the scribes and Pharisees. After His resurrection, though, He attained the height of all authority. We learn from 1 Corinthians 15 that the Father has put everything in subjection to Him except, of course, for the Father Himself. Jesus will continue to reign as King of heaven and earth until all His enemies have been defeated. Then, He will return the kingdom to the Father.

The meaning of this for us is quite simple. Obviously, even though Jesus is alive and well, He is no longer preaching and teaching on the earth. However, in the gospels, we do have the inspired record of His ministry, and in that record, the commands that came directly from Him are preserved. If Jesus said it, friends, that means that we have to do it. We don't get to pick and choose and only obey the commandments that we like or that are not particularly difficult to follow. When Jesus tells us that we must be born of water and the spirit in order to enter the kingdom of heaven, we must take Him at His word. Otherwise, we will be found in rebellion against the King of heaven.

In addition to Jesus, though, we also learn God's will **THROUGH THE APOSTLES**. Sometimes in our religious discussions, we encounter people who say they only follow the words of Christ. They typically have one of those words-of-Christ-in-red Bibles, and they only feel bound to obey the red part, so they ignore the black part. Of course, that's exactly the opposite of what the Lord intended. Even after He was gone, He intended to continue speaking through the apostles. Look at His words in John 14:25-26. There are several things we need to take from this text. To begin with, notice that when Jesus makes these promises to the apostles, He tells them that the promises will be fulfilled through the help of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is going to do two things. First, He would bring to their remembrance all that Jesus said to them. This was probably quite useful, since Jesus had been teaching them continuously for several years, and their natural recall probably wasn't any better than ours is.

Second, the Holy Spirit would also teach them all things. During His time on earth, Jesus hadn't revealed the fullness of God's plan to the apostles. For instance, He hadn't told them yet that the gospel was to go to the Gentiles. Peter learned that from the Spirit, not the Lord. Notice also that the promise here is that the apostles are going to be taught ALL things. There wasn't going to be continuing revelation through the centuries. The first-century apostles got it all. The point for us, then, is that the things the apostles speak through the Holy Spirit have the same force as the words of Christ. There's no black-letter/red-letter distinction. God is going to hold us to account for obeying the apostles too.

Learning God's Will Today.

To this point, things seem quite simple. If we want to learn God's will for our lives, we just need to find an inspired apostle and listen to him, right? Sadly, it's not quite that easy. For one thing, the Scripture tells us about **THE END OF THE APOSTLES**. Just like elders and deacons do, the office of apostle had specific qualifications attached to it. We learn about these from the selection of Judas' replacement in Acts 1:21-22. There was more to being an apostle

than just being a high muckety-muck in the church. The very purpose of apostleship was to be a witness to the resurrection of Jesus. In other words, in order to be an apostle, you had to have seen the risen Lord yourself.

The early church took this extremely seriously. We don't have to read very far in the letters of Paul to find a place where he defends his apostleship by saying something like, "I am an apostle; I am not lying." This qualification is the reason why. The early Christians knew that Paul wasn't even a follower of Christ at all when Christ appeared on earth after His resurrection. To many of those early Christians, that meant that Paul right off the bat could not possibly be qualified to be an apostle, regardless of anything else he did. It's completely fair for us to hold men to the same standard today. Unless someone will at least claim to be an eyewitness of the resurrection, he cannot possibly be an apostle.

Of course, there is no shortage today of so-called apostles who do claim to have seen Jesus. Such claims strike us as ludicrous, and they should. Look at what Paul tells us about visions of the risen Lord in 1 Corinthians 15:7-9. Paul himself acknowledges here the irregular nature of his claim to be an apostle. He didn't see Jesus before His ascension. However, because Jesus did appear to him on the road to Damascus, Paul could still be an eyewitness, even though he was "born out of due time". Notice, though, that Paul dismisses even the possibility of someone else becoming an apostle like he did. He says that he saw Jesus "last of all". In other words, until the day of our Lord's return, the very last person to see Jesus in the flesh was Paul. Anybody else since who claims apostleship on that basis is lying.

Of course, that's only half of the equation. What about the prophets whom we saw mentioned in Ephesians 3? Do any prophets still speak for God today? The problem with that is that just as the word warns of the end of the apostles, it also warns of **THE END OF SPIRITUAL GIFTS**. We see this in so many words in 1 Corinthians 13:8-10. The spiritual gifts of inspiration, like speaking in tongues or prophecy, were never meant to be a permanent part of the kingdom. Instead, they existed to fill a need in the first-century church. Back then, of course, the written word had not yet been completed. The early Christians needed some way to find out at least part of the will of God, so they were given a partial revelation through speaking in tongues and prophecy. Today, though, that need no longer exists. We have the written word, which is perfect and complete. Now that the perfect word has come, the partial gifts will pass away.

We learn more about why the gifts of inspiration faded away, along with all the other gifts, from a study of the eighth chapter of Acts. Look with me at the events described in Acts 8:5-6. This Philip is not the apostle Philip. Instead, this is the man whom Scripture elsewhere calls Philip the evangelist. Along with Stephen, he was one of the seven deacons appointed to see to the needs of the Hellenistic widows back in Acts 6. However, even though he was not an apostle, he clearly had miraculous gifts from God, and his preaching and signs converted the people of Samaria.

However, as impressive as Philip the evangelist was, there was something he couldn't do, and we learn about it in Acts 8:14-17. Philip could baptize, Philip could make disciples, but he couldn't pass on the miraculous gifts that he himself had. Instead, only the apostles like Peter and John could do that. The Samaritans were saved as saved could be before Peter and John got there, but only when the apostles came and laid their hands on them did they receive the spiritual gifts that they needed to learn the will of Jesus as new citizens of His kingdom.

Although the Scripture doesn't spell it out for obvious reasons, this tells us what happened to the first-century spiritual gifts. During the time of their ministry, the apostles went throughout the known world laying hands on the new Christians they converted, thus giving them the miraculous spiritual gifts. Those new Christians could speak in tongues and prophesy. A very few, like Luke, even joined the ranks of the authors of the New Testament. However, these non-apostolic prophets could not pass the ability to prophesy on to anyone else. As a result, as the first century progressed, two things continued to happen. First, one by one, the apostles died off. Second, even as that was happening, the apostles and the other prophets wrote the documents we have today in the New Testament. Finally, the New Testament was completed. Probably also about that time, the last of the apostles passed on to his reward.

That was a good-news bad-news situation for the early church. The bad news was that it no longer had anyone who could create new prophets and tongue-speakers. There were still some left from the time of the apostles, but once those men died, the church would be out of continuing revelation. The good news, though, was that it no longer needed continuing revelation. The written word of God was complete. Now, a Christian who wanted to know God's will for his life didn't have to wait to find out until he could ask a prophet. Instead, all he had to do was turn to the relevant section in the written word, and the Scripture itself would tell him all he needed to know. Once those apostolic writings became so important, it's hardly a surprise that the early Christians went into a frenzy of copying the epistles and gospels and passing them around. As a result, we have far more Biblical manuscripts than any other writing from the ancient world.

This takes us full circle, then, back to **LEARNING GOD'S WILL TODAY** through the word. Look at one of the passages we began with, Ephesians 3:4. We don't have Paul with us today. However, we still have Paul's insight into the mystery of Christ, because when we read what he wrote 2000 years ago, we can still understand it. The Bible wasn't written for some priestly class to interpret. It wasn't written only for the benefit of those whose hearts had been anointed by the Holy Spirit. It was written for us. This is how we discover the commandments of God today. We read them, we understand them, and we obey them. If we follow this simple process, we can be certain of the reward of heaven.