

**Sermon Title: Discerning the Will of God**  
**Biblical Text: Romans 12:2b**  
**Teaching Series: Justified by Love**  
**Preaching Date: October 30, 2022**  
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## **Romans 12:2b**

*... that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.*

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In a world obsessed with personal desire, the Christian seeks to know and live the desire of God. That's what I'd like to talk about today. What is God's will? How do we discern his will? And what does it look like to live his will? The second half of Romans 12:2, gives us clear road map for our consideration. Look at it with me.

***Read Romans 12:2b ... that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.*** Here's how we'll organize our time today

...

- Conceiving God's will. *What is it?*
- Discerning God's will. *How do we know it for our lives?*
- Obeying God's will. *How do we live it?*

[Prayer]

## **Movement 1: Conceiving God's Will (v.12, 1**

**Thessalonians 4:3; 5:16-18, 2 Peter 2:3, John 42:2,**

**Psalm 115:3, Ephesians 1:11)**

Paul has taken his most drastic thematic shift in the whole letter to the Romans. The first eleven chapters are committed to doctrinal teaching. He wants his readers to know the gospel and know God. Specifically he is repeatedly explaining that Jews and Gentiles are justified by love, they are saved by grace through faith. Now he transitions from Christians thinking to Christian living. Paul is writing to a diverse city no unlike Chicago. Some people have lived in Rome their whole lives. Others have moved to the city from small towns in Wisconsin, Indiana, and surrounding suburban areas, and for various reasons. No matter where they've come from, they all bring with them a way of life, a way of living.

Most people move to the big city because the big city makes a big promise: you can become great here. Whether you desire community, marriage, education, money, or fame, the city promises to meet your desires. There is, of course, an exchange. There's a price to pay for this desire to be met. Different cities have different prices. For your desires to be met in New York City or Los Angeles you have to be unique. For your desires to be met in San Francisco you have to have a great idea, in Boston you have to be brilliant. For your desires to be met in Chicago you have to work. In our city you have to be willing to work harder than anyone and everyone. Our city of big shoulders will meet your deepest longings, it promises, as long as you're willing to work.

If you're a Chicago native the work is about being strong. Weathered by years of suffering professional sports teams, brutal weather, and dealing with the real and

fictionalized reputation of violence ... you feel like you can do anything. If you move to Chicago for school or career, work is about never resting and giving yourself to deadlines, projects, and climbing the ladders of your company. Nevertheless, we are all committed to working hard because we want our desires to be met. Or in the language of our investigation today, *because we want our will to be done*.

Paul has just finished explaining that Christians are those who offer their whole self as living sacrifices (v.1). *Everybody worships*. We are meant to worship in countercultural ways, against the grain of the prevailing practices of first-century Rome or twenty-first century Chicago. *Everything shapes our worship*. Paul warned his readers not to be conformed by the loves of Rome and Chicago, but rather be transformed by the renewal of our minds (v.2a). Now, because of this renewed mind, the Apostle explains, we can know and obey the will of God. *Everyone obeys someone*. He says, **Read Romans 12:2b ... *that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect***. With this new mind we can test, discern, and obey God's will. In other words, in a city committing to fulfilling their own desires through work, by grace we can fulfill the desires of God.

Now, of course, we should ask, *why would we want to do that? Why would we want to fulfill God's desires? And, what does God desires? What exactly is God's will?*

This should concern us on a number of levels. Everyday we need to make decisions. *Where should we live? What school should my kids go to? Should we move to the suburbs? Should I date this person? Should we have children? How*

*should I respond to my friend or boss or neighbor?* Everyday we are faced with decisions. *What's God want us to do?* Christians are instructed and empowered to make decisions based on God's will and word. That means we're supposed to daily resist the city's promise to accomplish our will.

When we talk about the will of God we're talking about at least two things. For centuries theologians have understood God's will as both what *should* happen and what *shall* happen. (Some add a third, what he allows happen. But we'll focus on just the two.) Both are God's will.

- What God desires, or what should happen does not always. What *should* happen is often called God's moral (or preceptive) will. We might also think about his moral will as centered on what God values. Notice, Paul describes God's will as that which is, ***"good and acceptable and perfect."*** We sense this aspect of his will whenever he commands us or conveys his desire for us to live a certain way. Like in 1 Thessalonians, ***Read 1 Thessalonians 4:3 ... "For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from sexual immorality."*** God's will is that we are sanctified; that is we grow in holiness. But there's more. A few verses later Paul says, ***Read 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 ... "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you."*** That's God's moral will; that we would be joyful, prayerful, and thankful. *Are you with me?* This aspect of God's will is also about salvation, at some level. Peter explains, ***Read 2 Peter 3:9 ... "The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance."***

God desires that everyone would repent, but not everyone does. God wills that all his people grow in holiness, but we can still resist this process.

- What God ordains, or what shall happen always happens. What *shall* happen is known as his sovereign (or decretive) will. We might think about his sovereign will as what God purposes. We get this from Job's story, the much afflicted faithful servant of God. He says, *Read John 42:2 ... "I know that you can do all things, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted."* That's God's sovereign will. What he wills, happens. The psalmist even says, *Read Psalm 115:3 ... "Our God is in the heavens; he does all that he pleases."* Paul also writes God's sovereign will, *Read Ephesians 1:11 ... "In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will ..."* God desires his purposes to be accomplished, and they always are accomplished.

Another name for God's moral will is his revealed will. That's because by his grace, God wants us to know his will. He wants us to know his will more than we do. Another name for God's sovereign will is his hidden will. That's because by his wisdom and love, God does not overwhelm us with the fullness of his plans and purposes because we could neither comprehend nor carry them. This is instructive to us because many of us spend too much time, and too much emotion trying to understand God's sovereign will to the neglect of his moral will. We ignore what he is making plain because we can't see what he is keeping secret.

Back in Romans 12, the nature of God's will which is in focus is his moral will, his revealed will. That is his will which he longs to be fulfilled and obeyed yet may or

may not. In order for his moral will to be done in and through us we need a new mind ... and we must resist our own will ... and use that mind to test and discern what he desires for us to do.

## **Movement 2: Discerning God's Will (v.12, 1**

### **Corinthians 2:16, John 1:5;10, 14:26, 1 Corinthians 11:7-12)**

Let me repeat an important point which I think we should find quite hopeful: God wants you to know his will. We are to resist conforming to this world, resist trusting the false promises of the city ... and we are to be transformed by the renewal of our minds. The very fact that we are given a new mind assures us that God is giving us what we need in order to understand his will. It's grace. It's love. It's mercy. Specifically, through salvation you have been given the mind of Christ. *Read 1 Corinthians 2:16 ... "For who has understood the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?" But we have the mind of Christ."* Because of this new mind, you can understand the mind of the Lord. We can discern the God's revealed or moral will.

Let's get real specific. This new mind or consciousness is awake to some new realities. These realities empower us discern, Paul says in Romans 12:2, what is good, acceptable, and perfect to God. Those new realities are God's Spirit, God's Word, and God's People. These are how we "test and discern" what God wants us to know and do. You see, when we are seeking to understand God's will, these are the places we're supposed to look for clarity and understanding. This is not what the city does nor does this world teach us to do anything like this. The city tells us to look within, to the invisible and felt desires of hearts. But followers of Jesus

look to the Spirit, word, and people. Whether we are making a specific decision or we're simply learning to build our lives, we should look to all three of these realities.

- God's Spirit helps us discern God's will. Jesus tells his disciples that after his ascension to the Father, *Read John 14:26 ... "the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you."* Notice Jesus calls the Holy Spirit, "the Helper." That's who he is. That's what he does. The Spirit of God inhabits his people and helps them know and remember the will of God, or what Jesus has said. This is not his only role in our lives, but it is vital. And it's more than a feeling. The Holy Spirit is not a feeling. The Holy Spirit is God. We ask him for help. *Is there sin in my life? Is there truth I'm forgetting? What is good, acceptable, and perfect? Am I seeing things clearly? Am I operating out of love or fear?* As we seek the Spirit's guidance he directs us to the truth and beauty of Jesus. He does not validate your hunches. He is not a spiritual escape clause from holiness. God's Spirit helps us discern God's will by reminding us of who God is, who we are, and what he has said.
- God's Word helps us discern God's will. The word helps us by exposing us and exposing the gospel. In fact, like the Spirit we're told the word is meant to dwell in us. John describes the word as light, a light which tells the truth about us and the truth about God. *Read 1 John 1:5,10 ... "This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all ... If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us."* That's how the will of God works

through the word. It exposes the brilliance of God. It exposes the sinfulness of people. But as God's will and our will are exposed, the word points us to Jesus ... the one who forgives, heals, restores, and empowers us to know and obey his will. To discern God's will then, we open our Bibles. And we ask questions. As we make decisions ... as we build our lives ... *How does God's word expose sin in my life? How does God's word speak beauty and truth? How does it point me to trust Christ and walk in his light? God's word helps us discern God's will by exposing us and exposing the gospel.* It explicitly tells us what is good, acceptable, and perfect. And when we fall short, the word of grace is extended to us.

- God's People help us discern God's will. Theologian Marva Dawn notes, ***"one terribly overlooked aspect of testing and approving the will of God is that we do that within the framework of Christian community and not alone"*** (*Truly the Community*, 53). Too many of us, too often make decision in isolation. We are made for community and knowing God and his will with God's people. Turn with me to 1 Corinthians 11:7. We're going to read a few verses. Paul is teaching his readers about their union with one another, through the Spirit. ***Read 1 Corinthians 11:7-12 ... "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. For to one is given through the Spirit the utterance of wisdom, and to another the utterance of knowledge according to the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, to another the working of miracles, to another prophecy, to another the ability to distinguish between spirits, to another various kinds of tongues, to another the interpretation of tongues. All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills. For just as the***



***body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.*** " We've all be given different insight and understanding by God's Spirit ... but it's not just for us. It's for the common good. The good of your church family. Members of one body. And so once we've heeded the instruction of God's Spirit and God's Word, we go to God's People and ask for their insight and help. *Do your brothers and sisters agree or disagree? Do they see God's word or sense God's Spirit differently? What do they uniquely contribute to your understanding and application of God's Word?* God's people help us discern God's will by using their gifts for the good of all. The primary responsibility of God's people in determining God's will is to make sure Gods' Spirit and God's Word have been heard and heeded appropriately. But this is not about conformity to a social ideology. If God's Word and God's Spirit have been humbly consulted then God's People celebrate freedom we have in Christ to apply God's will differently.

### **Movement 3: Obeying God's Will (v.12, 1 Samuel**

#### **16:7)**

***Conceiving*** God's will is all about understanding his moral desires. ***Discerning*** God's will is all about consulting God's Spirit, Word, and People. Having considered what God's will is ... and what Paul means that we should and can test God's will ... we now have to think about what it looks like to obey his will. In fact, the word Paul chooses for "discern" communicates both the idea of discovery and application. Scholar Leon Morris explains, Paul ***"is arguing for the spiritual discernment that ascertains what God wants us to do and then sets itself to do it"*** (*The Epistle to the Romans*, 436). Or as someone else has said, *we don't find out*

*the will of God to think about it ... but to do it.* We do this a lot, *don't we?* I mean, just think about God's will. We spend hours and years in comment sections and small groups talking about God's love for the poor or the corrosive nature of greed or the need for confession. But, *have we helped the poor? Have we practiced generosity? Are we being honest about our desires and shortcomings with our community?* In other words, we stop short. We know the will of God. That's good. But in order to fully discern his will we must obey it.

We must do good.

We must do what is acceptable to God.

We must be perfect, or live whole in Christ.

Now, obeying God's will may cause us some fear. Let's talk about that. We might be afraid that if we don't do what is good, acceptable, and pleasing in God's eyes he'll be angry and upset with us. And God's Spirit, Will, and People rarely are very specific. *Right?* They can't tell us specifically who to marry, nor what place to go for lunch, nor who to vote for, nor where to live or what job to take or how much money to make or give away. *Right?* God's will does not work like that. God's will does not prescribe practical specifics, instead God's will forms character. To be sure, there are aspects of God's moral will which are clear commands. The Ten Commandments for instance (see Exodus 20:3-17). But most of his moral will shapes our character into the likeness of Jesus and then we are given freedom in the specifics. The Fruit of the Spirit are a good example (see Galatians 5:22-33).

Let's keep in mind, obedience is always a matter of the heart. We can seemingly do what is good, acceptable, and perfect and not really be in obedience. Think the religions leaders or Pharisees when Jesus called them "white washed tomb" ...

clean on the outside, dead on the inside (Matthew 23:27). Similarly we could fail to perfectly and precisely do what God wills and still be pleasing to him because our hearts are submitted to him. Think about Jesus three years with the disciples ... he repeated himself a lot, but he kept them around. That's what the Lord reminded the prophet Samuel when he was looking for a new king in Israel, ***Read 1 Samuel 16:7 ... "Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."*** God looks to the heart. This is a matter of divine grace and kindness. And it frees us from obeying out of fear and frees us to obey out of love. And it frees us from believing that God wills what he doesn't and doesn't will what he does.

For instance, a lot of Christians leave Chicago. And of course, they leave for many different reasons. Many of us many leave at some point. In my short time in the city (about eight years) few things have been more over-spiritualized and done without any attempt to discern the will of God. You see, the question is not, *does God want me to leave Chicago?* But rather, *why do I want to leave? Or, what is compelling me to stay? If we are compelled to leave, are we leaving out of love or fear? If we are compelled to stay, are we staying for the sake of our own glory and good or the glory of the Lord and the good of our neighbors?* Maybe we go to God's Spirit and God's Word and God's People, and yet ... there are no specifics, no practical answers, no clear biblical commands about what city to call home. *Right? So what do we do?* Well, we test and discern the will of God.

- We go to his Spirit and ask him to remind us of what Jesus taught.
- We go to his Word and allow the light to expose sin and point us to truth.
- We go to his People and invite their gifts to hold us accountable.

Whether we move or not, or get married or not, or whatever or not ... God's will is for you to love and trust him. God's will is for you to be unhitched from the lives of this world and any city you could call home. And if you can do that, and there is no clear prohibition, do what you want.

When St. Augustine, the North African theologian was preaching from 1 John 4 he centered God's will upon love. He told his listeners, ***“Love God and do whatever you please: for the soul trained in love to God will do nothing to offend the One who is Beloved.”*** God's will is all about love. God's will invites us to love him. Obeying God's will is ultimately about our love for him and his purposes and desires over and against our own desires and the desires of our city. And so, with Augustine I invite you ... *love God, and do whatever you please.*