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Sermon author: Dennis Mullen - Morrison Hill Christian Church P. O. Box 59 Kingston, TN 37763 USA 865.376.5205 dennis@morrisonhill.com
www.morrisonhill.com www.waitingforsunday.com

Guidance 3 – How does God guide me? 8.23.9

Last week, one of my college friends posted a note on Facebook asking for prayer. He said that he and his wife had been led to resign from the church where he was serving without having another job lined up, and now with only a few weeks left of employment, he was putting out feelers for another job. I know where he is coming from, and I'm not denying here that God did lead him. But how? Did he hear a voice? See a vision? Was it spelled out for him in his alphabet soup? I doubt it. More than likely, he was having some significant trouble at the church. Maybe there was a significant element there that wanted him gone, and he was tired of fighting it, and tired of what it was doing to his family. If something like that is the case, he probably made a wise decision. But was it God's leading?

Recently [Minnesota Representative Michelle Bachman was asked](#) if she would run for President. She said: *"If I felt that's what the Lord was calling me to do, I would do it," she answered. "When I have sensed that the Lord is calling me to do something, I've said yes to it. But I will not seek a higher office if God is not calling me to do it. That's really my standard."* That kind of talk invites ridicule in the media, but even fellow Christians should ask what she means by that. Will she pray about it and then wait for an impression in her heart, or for a sign? Will she form an exploratory committee to study the likelihood of success? Will she hold some fundraisers and see how much money she can raise? Probably all of that. But when she is through, how will she know the difference between wanting to run and God wanting her to run? How will the voters know? (I suspect the voters will decide based on whether they like her or not!)

Such are the complications when Christians say that God is leading them. If a preacher says that "the Lord put it on my heart to raise money for a new building", it's dicey to oppose his idea because who wants to oppose the Lord? If someone tells me that God led them to come to this church or God led them to leave this church, it gets awkward to ask for reasons, but the reasons often sound mundane: The preacher at my old church is preaching things I disagree with. My kids aren't happy there. I have a deep conflict with someone here, and it doesn't seem to be getting any better, and so I want to go somewhere else and worship in peace. Those are all pretty good reasons, but are we to equate them with the voice of the Lord?

In [this series on Guidance From God](#), we have noted some of the pitfalls of claiming God's leading, but we have also seen that the relationship the Bible describes is so very personal – God within us, in fact – that we can hardly draw any other conclusion that God wants to lead us and in fact he will lead us if we allow Him.

Last week, we asked: **Does God have a specific plan for my life? The answer we found is yes, God has a plan that is incredibly specific and it touches every area of your life. The plan is that you become a fully devoted and equipped follower of Jesus Christ and that you live a life worthy of that calling.** But I also did my best to show you that he hasn't promised to make all your decisions for you, or even the ones you consider the really big ones. God speaks

to us as a Father, and calls himself our Father, so I think my relationship with my Dad is instructive. When I was an infant, Mom and Dad made all my decisions, but as I grew, they allowed me and even required me to make more and more of them, and in fact their concern shifted away from whether or not I made THE right choice to whether or not I became a person who made wise and responsible decisions. When I bought my first car, an old clunker that cost \$600, Dad agreed to loan me the money, but when I asked if I should buy this car or not, he only said, "Well, a car like that is closer to the end of its life than the beginning." He wanted me to choose and learn from the consequences, good and bad, and I did. Now the difference is that God knows everything, and unlike Dad, he knew that the car would last me another two years before I traded it in on a more expensive but less reliable model. But from Scripture, it appears that his goal is similar to Dad's, that we grow and mature and become complete. And that takes experience. And experience comes from making decisions, good and bad. The well-known passage on spiritual gifts, **Ephesians 4:11-16** shows us his concern:

¹¹It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, ¹²to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ¹³until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

¹⁴Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. ¹⁵Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. ¹⁶From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

So the question for today is: How does God lead me? Today I want to give you what I see as the most important general principals, and then next week I plan to talk about some specific things we wonder about.

God leads us in the context of FREEDOM.

There are Christians, including some popular Christian authors, who teach that God has a perfect will for your life in the sense that he has a right choice for your every decision, and he will show you what that is...IF you will listen closely to Him and if you are mature enough to receive it. We saw that graphed out last week with the dot at the center of a circle which shows all the things you could do that God would be OK with, and the one perfect choice at the center. Now as I wrapped up last week, I promised to mention some of the dangers of this view, which I believe is unscriptural. One of the dangers I've seen is that those who are most sensitive to God's will end up discouraged when they don't hear a clear word from God, and they put the blame on themselves. "I have prayed and fasted, and I still don't have a clear sign from the Lord whether or not I should start this business. What am I doing wrong? Why can't I hear God?" Or, they reach out and grasp at a sign, any sign they can find, in order to make a decision and move forward. But then, when things turn out badly, when the new business fails disastrously, they nearly drown in guilt and confusion. "I was so sure! What happened? How did I fall out of God's will?" Now, if Scripture gave examples of mature Christians looking for inner impressions and outward signs before they moved forward, I would say that such problems are just part of life. But the great majority of Scripture shows a different example from beginning to end, and that example is God guiding his people within the context of freedom – and greater freedom in this age, the age of Christ, than ever before.

In fact, freedom in Christ is such a central part of the good news of Jesus Christ that I think the desire to surrender our freedom and try to get God to always choose for us is almost a repudiation of the Gospel. **2 Corinthians 3:17** says: **¹⁷Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.**

Now I'll be the first to say that true freedom isn't in doing whatever you want. That's the wisdom of this age, and it leads to slavery to everything physical. **Psalm 119:32** says: **I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free.** Just like it frees you to play softball when you mark out the foul lines and get some good umpires to call balls and strikes and outs, so too we find our freedom within the paths of God's command, God's word. But it REALLY is freedom.

In the Garden of Eden, before sin, what was God's command? Don't eat from the tree of knowledge! We all know that. Except that wasn't his command. His command was: "Of all the trees in the Garden you may freely eat, and you don't have to ask me which one. YOU choose. There's just one I forbid..." Freedom within the paths of his command.

Things changed quickly. Adam and Eve sinned and we fell, and eventually the Law came. Now under the Law, there was no freedom, right? Except that there was! Compared to our day, the OT Law is restrictive. Don't eat pork. Don't eat shellfish. Don't blend two kinds of fibers in your fabric. Don't boil a young goat in its mother's milk. Many laws. But the nature of law is that, once you know where the boundaries are, you can do what you please inside the boundaries. There's even something described in the Law as a freewill offering, which is an offering that God doesn't tell you to give and the Law doesn't tell you either – YOU decided when and what (within God's stated boundaries). There's actually a NT corollary to that one. As Paul gives instruction about giving in **2 Corinthians 9**, he says: **⁶Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. ⁷Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.** What's the right amount to give here? Whatever you have decided in your heart, whatever you can give cheerfully. Freedom.

The Holy Grail, so to speak, of finding God's will is marriage. So many marriages go wrong these days that we long for God to tell us who to marry, and nearly every couple that comes to me to get married has a story about how God brought them together (which I don't necessarily deny) and many of them imply that this is the person God chose for them. It's instructive to read Paul's teaching on marriage in **1 Corinthians 7**.

First, this: **²⁵Now about virgins: I have no command from the Lord, but I give a judgment as one who by the Lord's mercy is trustworthy. ²⁶Because of the present crisis, I think that it is good for you to remain as you are. ²⁷Are you married? Do not seek a divorce. Are you unmarried? Do not look for a wife. ²⁸But if you do marry, you have not sinned; and if a virgin marries, she has not sinned. But those who marry will face many troubles in this life, and I want to spare you this.**

That last line doesn't sound too encouraging, but notice the context of freedom. It's good for you to stay single. But if you get married, that's okay too. Freedom.

Now it isn't complete freedom, but rather freedom within the paths of God's commands. You're not supposed to divorce one person to marry another. You're not supposed to marry an unbeliever. But let's say there is a widow in your family who wants to get married. Who should she marry? Does God have her husband picked out for her? Listen:

³⁹A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord. ⁴⁰In my judgment, she is happier if she stays as she is—and I think that I too have the Spirit of God. Anyone she wishes! (As long as he belongs to the Lord). Even her happiness is an issue to be considered, even though we talk of happiness as a purely selfish concern. Paul is concerned about her happiness and her freedom.

We could go on with examples, but suffice it to say that God leads us in the context of giving us freedom to choose, to learn, to make mistakes, and to grow. Years ago, Rich Mullins had a song that said: We are responsible. We are free. We are responsible TO be free. When you realize that God created us in his image and is restoring us to the fullness of that image, you understand what it means that we are responsible TO be free, and why it is that God leads us in the context of freedom. The second general principle...

God leads us in the paths of Scripture.

We've already heard **Psalm 119:32** saying, **I run in the path of your commands, for you have set my heart free.** Consider also **2 Timothy 3:16-17**, **¹⁶All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, ¹⁷so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.** The Bible itself contains so much of God's will that it is incredibly foolish but fairly common to say we're seeking God's will about our money or family and yet we're living in ignorance of God's Word about simplicity and debt and disciplining children and sacrificial love in marriage. When I say that God's plan for you is very specific and personal, I'm referring to the thousand and one ways in which the Bible instructs our character, our choices, and our attitudes.

I think about my friend who posted his prayer need on Facebook. Probably as he assessed his employment with his church, he saw bitterness growing up in his family, or maybe a lack of evangelistic zeal in his leaders – both of which contradict God's Word – and he concluded that it was time to go somewhere else for the sake of his kids and also to be a good steward of his own time and ministry. In other words, he found God's will in Scripture – that he not exasperate his children, but bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord (**Ephesians 6:4**), and that he give his life to the Great Commission (**Matthew 28:19-20**) and he decided he needed to leave a bad situation in order to fulfill God's will as revealed in Scripture. That's a good use of Scripture and a healthy way to find and apply God's will.

I won't dwell on this second point, since most of our teaching in church is about applying God's Word to life, but let me add this: One of the mistakes Christians have made is to reduce our whole relationship with God to the act of reading the Bible, as if God, being otherwise occupied in the universe, simply left us with a book to read, like when your parents would leave a note on the table saying "Dinner's in the fridge. Feed the dog and don't forget to put the trash out by the road. We'll be home later." If that were all there was to the relationship, our relationship with God would be no different than a historian's relationship with Thomas Jefferson.

But in fact, God is interested in shaping us for maturity and for eternity, so even within his word, he calls us to a deeper and very personal relationship. When Jesus spoke to his disciples on the night before his death, he told them **"If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching"** (**John 14:23**), and then he added that even though he was departing from them in the bodily form they had known, the relationship wasn't ending. He then added: **But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of**

everything I have said to you (14:27). The relationship God wants with us, the guidance he wants to give is so personal that his spirit comes to live within us. Not to make all our choices for us, though, but to help us grow up. Which brings us to the third general principle...

God leads us to a life of WISDOM.

So if God isn't going to make our decisions for us, why pray? Or what exactly can we expect from the relationship from Him? The answer is wisdom. We can pray for wisdom, and God wants to give it in the context of the relationship of a Father to his child.

James 1:5 says: **⁵If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.** This wisdom isn't something you get just through experience or by living a long time. It comes from God and you have to ask for it, and when it arrives, it is indeed a gift from God. In **James 3**, he talks about worldly wisdom which produces quarrels and drama, and then says: **¹⁷But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.**

If God's desire was to always tell us what to do, where to go to school, which route to take to work and where to stop and eat (as some successful Christian teachers imply), we would no longer need the book of Proverbs, with its wise counsel about getting and applying wisdom. But we do need it and God uses it to mature us through its counsel, such as: **Proverbs 13:10 - Pride only breeds quarrels, but wisdom is found in those who take advice. 15:22 - Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed.** When we looked at Paul's plans for travel and ministry in **Romans 15** last week, we saw him not waiting for signs from God or inner impressions, but rather applying wisdom, weighing circumstances and opportunities while always being faithful to proclaim the Gospel wherever he was.

And he did so with humility too, which is the only appropriate way to exercise wisdom, even when we seek our wisdom from God. In **James 4**, James criticizes businessmen who make their plans without the Lord in mind: **Now listen, you who say, "Today or tomorrow we will go to this or that city, spend a year there, carry on business and make money." Why, you do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes (vs. 13-14).** Now notice that he doesn't tell them to instead make no plans other than what God tells them to do. Rather, he says to apply wisdom in planning with humility. **Instead, you ought to say, "If it is the Lord's will, we will live and do this or that." As it is, you boast and brag. All such boasting is evil. Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins (vs. 15-17).** Or, as it says in **Proverbs 21:30 - There is no wisdom, no insight, no plan that can succeed against the LORD.**

So how does God lead us? His desire is to lead us to a life of wisdom, maturity. To get us there, he leads us in the path of Scripture, and not in an impersonal, academic way. Indeed, he puts His own Holy Spirit inside us to lead us into truth and wisdom even as we study Scripture, which makes it a living word to us. And underlying it all, God leads us in the context of giving us freedom – freedom to grow, to mature, to make decisions, to fail sometimes and to learn from failure and success.

Sometimes it seems like my failures to follow God's wisdom outnumber my successes. But there are times when I'll preach a sermon or call someone or make a visit and the timing is just so right or the topic is just so pertinent to what people are growing through that I realize that God has been leading me that week and speaking through me. This isn't cause for pride – remember how he spoke through Balaam's donkey in the OT! But when it happens through me, or when

someone else brings a blessing to me in perfect timing, it is a cause to rejoice. We have a Father who does want to lead us, to give us wisdom and apply it. When we let him teach us in that way, it's remarkable how gracious he is to bring out fruit with perfect timing.

Prayer and Invitation