

HOW TO BE GUIDED BY GOD

by

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Years ago, Dianne and I found ourselves on the southern border of Texas, preparing to enter Mexico as missionaries. But we hadn't the faintest idea where to minister in that vast country. So we spent a day in a motel seeking God. It was a typical missionary situation. We were on the way, but did not know exactly where to go. The Lord spoke to both of us through some biblical principles.

While we prayed, we felt peace that we should go to the next large city in Mexico, beyond the border towns. This was Ciudad Victoria, about 200 miles south of Texas. We had the name of a missionary there, although we did not know him personally. So off we went the next day.

Upon arrival in Ciudad Victoria, we looked up the missionary. He explained how he desired to start another church in a section of town that had none, but his up-coming move to Guadalajara left him no time. He introduced us to the family that wanted a church started on their property. We unpacked our suitcases and our ministry in Mexico started right there! God's personal word to us was fulfilled to the letter.

This sounds like we literally fell into God's will through a simple chain of events. Yet I vividly recall the feeling of uncertainty as we wrestled for guidance in that motel room.

Is it normal to find ourselves puzzling over God's will from time to time? During a recent Bible study on divine guidance, a new Christian complained that God's will is sometimes difficult to find. "Why doesn't He speak audibly and just say what He wants? he asked. But we needn't feel something is wrong because God's will is temporarily obscure. Good reasons exist for this phenomenon.

The Lord sometimes speaks in striking ways. At times we have no doubt about guidance.

But finding God's will is frequently harder than that, as though He were deliberately hiding it. The Christian may be obliged to act like a detective hunting for clues. He digs into the Word, seeks counsel, and prays for guidance. He wishes God would speak louder. He might even develop

feelings of inferiority, because he cannot hear God clearly. Eventually the clues all point in one direction so that he reaches an intelligent conclusion about what God wants.

Few things irritate me more than a brash and boastful person who portrays that his relationship with God and level of faith is such that he always discerns God's will accurately and instantly. I simply don't believe him. Both God's Word and the experience of Christians throughout the ages indicate that such boastful declarations have roots in spiritual pride rather than genuine experience.

Divine Guidance is based on Godly Wisdom. Ephesians 5:17 clearly links wisdom with understanding the will of God.

... do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is.

Since no one attains perfect wisdom in this life, it follows that everyone has plenty to learn. God faithfully rescues us when we make honest mistakes. But this reflects more on His ability to guide than on our ability to follow.

The element of mystery in finding His will exists to provoke growth in wisdom and knowledge. So when teaching on guidance, I spend more time on the aspects of guidance combined. Let's take a look at some of these characteristics from James 3:17:

But 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.

In presenting this verse I don't mean to stress the attainment of wisdom, but rather understanding the characteristics of it. These two are vastly different. If we imagine that we must acquire great wisdom before being able to follow the Lord accurately, then we risk getting into fear and bondage. Christians have a natural sense of unworthiness anyway, due to an awakened conscience. Sometimes Satan tries to pervert that virtue into an inferiority complex. No, the only qualification for understanding the characteristics of Divine Wisdom is the ability to read James 3:17. And here's the description we find...

First pure

When we have to make an important decision we can always compare it with this passage. If all of the characteristics match, the decision is probably right. If any are missing, especially the first one, PURITY, then it is a satanic

trap. If it passes this first test, we can then ask God for confirmation via other signs.

Satan can counterfeit any aspect of Divine Wisdom in James 3:27 except purity. Any element of shady dealing, duplicity, or little white lies, is clear proof that the whole affair is diabolical in origin.

During our ministry in Ecuador, a couple in the states offered us a car. It seemed to be genuine answer to prayer. Though certain import restrictions intervened, a little white lie to the Ecuadorian government could resolve everything. After all, we reasoned, the whim of the local official is the law in actual practice here, so what difference does it make? We're doing Kingdom business. It's really no concern of theirs. (We can always rationalize a decision if we want something badly enough!)

I had no peace, so I sought God and He pointed out James 3:17 and the word "pure". We rejected the couple's kind offer. Later God provided honorably and honestly through another couple.

Then peace-loving

Which does it create: unity or dissension? I must qualify this because righteousness will always cause dissension where people are in sin. Purity is more important than peace, which is another reason why it appears first. Jesus said, *...I came not to send peace, but a sword.* Mat.10:34 In that context, He was talking about the conflict between good and evil that would center on Him. Paul said in Rom.12:18,

If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.

Some Christians desire peace among the brethren to such an extent that they're willing to sacrifice righteousness, shade the truth, or let sin and false doctrine go on rather than reprove it. Whenever we sacrifice purity for the sake of peace, we lose both.

Among truth-loving Christians there will be a general feeling of peace if the decision is from the Lord. A group of godly believers can often be to us what a safety rope is to a mountain climber.

Prov.11:14 For lack of guidance a nation falls, but many advisers make victory sure. Considerate

The word in the original Greek, used only this one time in the New Testament, carries the idea of being reasonable. The Amplified correctly renders it as, "willing to yield to reason". Have you ever met the zealot who is so sure of everything that you can't reason with him? Remaining open-minded can protect us from mistakes. But when the mind closes to new evidence, it often becomes closed to God.

Full of mercy and good fruits

What is the end result of the decision to be made? What is the ultimate fruit of it? Who will it help, and how? These questions can shed a lot of light on important decisions.

Submissive

Two young boys, new Christians, began to receive what they thought were leadings and messages from God. But along with this came the instruction that they should keep it from their pastor because he wouldn't understand. This went on for a while until some of the messages started getting a little weird.

Eventually, one of the boys became suspicious. He wondered if it made sense for the Spirit of God to reveal things to them which He hidden from their spiritual leader. After going to his pastor, he found out of course, that they had been hearing from the wrong spirit.

James goes to a lot of trouble to clarify the difference between worldly and Divine Wisdom. This can be summarized by two words: Pride vs. humility. But the pride in question is the most subtle and dangerous kind: spiritual pride. This vice is the most deceptive of all because the victim may consider himself to be wise, though he usually harbors envy and selfish ambitions.

The most humble man (for the least reason) that I have ever personally met was the late Dr. Francis Shaeffer. I visited his work in Switzerland several times while living as a missionary in Geneva. He had four earned Doctorates. Yet the first thing I noticed about him was his quiet and self-effacing manner. But when he spoke, it was shat I call "quiet thunder". This may seem contradictory but you would not think so if you had known him.

I was in Ecuador, while visiting the jungle, that the characteristics of Divine Wisdom as the key to guidance were revealed to me. The Lord used the native huts to show me the relationship between these characteristics and the various other signs that He uses to guide us. I noticed that the Indians spent as much time on the foundation as the rest of the house altogether.

Only after a solid foundation was completed, (generally a wooden platform raised well above the ground), would they put up the four corner posts. This foundation represents the characteristics of Divine Wisdom while the posts portray the specific signs by which God guides us. Everything stems from the foundation and depends upon it for stability.

One last caution before we go on to the various signs the Lord may give: Believers hungry for wisdom sometimes dedicate themselves to a study of the Book of Proverbs. But a Christian can no more attain to wisdom by reading Proverbs than he can get righteousness by reading the law of Moses. Why? Because, ... *one greater than Solomon is here.* Mt. 12:42

The wisdom of Christ is as superior Solomon's as Christ's righteousness is to that of the law. Solomon's wisdom is acquired, whereas that of Christ is intrinsic. Solomon learned through experience and observation. Christ is God's wisdom incarnate.

All of God's Word is to be studied and honored, but not every portion has the same relevance to the New Testament believer. God's Word is a progressive revelation, moving from the lesser wisdom to the greater. While Proverbs encourages a love for wisdom, Jesus is the fulfillment of it. ...*become for us wisdom from God — that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption.* I Cor.1:30 That's why Proverbs can help us to a degree, but we need more.

As we seek God's will, we must remember an essential principle: NEVER RELY ON ONE SIGN ONLY. While traveling from Los Angeles to Houston by car, I noticed that the highway department had thoughtfully placed signs at regular intervals to reassure the driver. The long and lonely stretches of desert can cause him to doubt if he is really on the right road. One signpost isn't enough for the whole trip.

If you receive a dream, a vision, or a prophecy, regarding an important matter, ask the Lord for two or three other signs as confirmation. Don't fear that this will displease God. Uncertainty is no sin if motivated by a sincere desire to please God.

The great Apostle Paul prayed three times for the Lord to remove his thorn in the flesh. Obviously he passed through a time when he was unsure of God's will regarding his problem.

People sometimes decry Gideon's lack of faith when he asked for confirmation via the fleeces. However, if an angel told me to attack 100,000 armed men, I would want some confirmation too! I see no scriptural

evidence that God gets mad if we aren't sure of His will. Sometimes He allows this in order to provoke us to seek Him.

Now let's look at some important "sign-posts" by which He confirms direction:

SIGN-POST N°1: Personal leadings for scripture

As you read the Bible during your daily quiet time, be attentive to the Holy Spirit within you. God will often illuminate verses as clues about His will.

We can approach God's Word this way as long as we keep in mind a couple of key points: First, we must be careful to take the PRINCIPLE embodied in the text as our guide, and not read into the text meanings not intended by the writer. Second, we not attempt to judge others based on what God is telling us.

It should be superfluous to say that God never leads a person contrary to the principles in His Word. Yet we continue to meet people who hold to doctrines or leadings totally contrary to Scripture, based on a dream, inner impression or a prophecy from someone they respect. Some even claim special "revelation knowledge" superior to the written Word of God. Well-grounded believers know the difference between personal leadings from God through the Word, and the evaluation of doctrine through sound principles of Biblical research.

SIGN-POST N°2: Inner peace

Colossians 3:15 Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts...

When standing at a crossroads between two decisions, we can use the peace of God in our hearts to help determine God's will. In choosing one of the roads at random, your peace may disappear as you start off on it. This indicates it's the wrong one. Turn around and go back down the other one. In your peace returns, it's probably the right choice.

SIGN-POST N°3: Godly counsel

Hebrews 13:17 Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account.

Men of God, seasoned by years of experience, will usually be able to detect a satanic trap. Better still, they can sort out those subtle mixtures between truth and error which is a favorite enemy device to confuse Christians. Every

minister knows that feeling of grief when a believer falls into a trap that could have been avoided if only the person had come for counsel. He also knows the joy of the Christian who understands that God often uses the minister as a safety-check before launching out into something dubious.

Yet, as with all truths, this one also must be kept in balance. The clause "them that have the rule over you" is a misleading translation of one single Greek word, HEGEMON, which simply means "guides". The true Christian leader is neither imposing nor dictatorial.

A mountain guide knows the paths to take, where the cliffs are, and how to use the ropes. But he doesn't walk behind his followers with a whip and force them to do his bidding.

Some immature ministers view their role as control and manipulation of others. Some even feel that they have a gift of knowing God's will for those around them. These make poor counselors.

A few years ago, the "Shepherding" movement was popular in the U.S. It involved a blind submission to the authorities of the church. The idea was that the believer would be broken of innate tendencies toward rebellion and independence, and thereby grow in Christ. This has just enough truth in it to be dangerous. True, attitudes of independence characterize many Christians, and it is difficult for pastors to deal with this. Yet the Shepherding movement backfired and has largely disappeared.

Why? It inevitably produced spiritual immaturity. People weren't taught how to hear from God for themselves. It resulted in Christians with Biblical doctrine but a cult-type mentality. Though this movement has largely disappeared, a similar pattern of thinking still exists among some individuals in the ministry. The best pastoral counsel is that which helps the believer hear from God for himself.

SIGNPOST N°4: Open doors (Opportunities)

Rev. 3:8 See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut.

I Cor.16:9 because a great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me.

Notice that Paul mentions adversaries. Sometimes we misunderstand and suppose that adversaries are a sign that the leading is erroneous. But the

reverse is often true. We are in a conflict and can expect opposition when God wants us to do something for Him.

Do the above points guarantee 100% accuracy in knowing God's will? Certainly not. Since He uses Divine Guidance as a means to teach wisdom and understanding, and because we never stop learning in this life, He would be doing us an injustice to allow that. Furthermore, God wants the element of faith to be always present in our walk with Him. How could faith be involved if all areas of risk were removed from guidance?

Insecure Christians tend to insist on 100% certainty before launching out "in faith" on any decision. This, of course, is self-contradictory. If we were always sure, how could faith be involved? Genuine faith steps out, believing that God is leading, and trusting Him to correct any mistakes.

Those who insist on a perfect system of Divine Guidance in this life are involved in a futile search. And those who claim to have found one are self-deceived. Our faith must ultimately rest in God's ability to direct us rather than the principles themselves, even though God uses these to guide us.