

Rich Nathan
A Church That Works
John 10:1-10
9-27/28-97 & 10-4/5-97

Liberating Thoughts Regarding God's Will For Your Life
(Parts I & II)

This morning I am going to talk about a subject that may be your chief concern as a follower of Christ. I am going to talk about how to know God's will for your life. And I bet that there are many of you right now in this audience who came to this conference hoping and praying that God would speak prophetically to you regarding what you are to do with your life.

"O God, give John Wimber a prophetic word where he stands me up in the audience and says, 'Thus sayeth the Lord...Here is the blueprint for the rest of your life.'"

Knowing God's will has always been the passion, the driving burning passion of Christians in every generation. There were two questions that Paul asked Jesus when Paul was struck blind on the road to Damascus. Many of you know the story. He is going to persecute Jewish followers of Jesus. He is hunting them down. He is breathing threats. He is gathering men, women and children and throwing them into jail. He is on his way to Damascus because he hears that there are Christians there and he is going to hunt them down.

Suddenly, on the way to Damascus, he sees a bright light in the sky. A voice speaks to him, "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?" Jesus so identifies with His people that when His people are hurt, He is hurt. "Why are you persecuting me?" Jesus asks.

The first question the apostle Paul asks Jesus is "who are you?" That is always to be our #1 question in life. Who are you, Lord? How can I know you better? At the very top of your list of life goals, you ought to put as #1 to know God better. There is no higher goal than to know God better.

Jesus said in John 17:3, "This is eternal life, that they know you the only true God and Jesus Christ whom Thou has sent." There is nothing better. There is nothing more satisfying. There is nothing more worthy of your life's attention than to know God better. Because in it is eternal life. The enjoyment of the life in heaven, and to the extent that we get to taste heaven now, it is through our knowledge of God.

But the second question that Paul asked after he asked "who are you, Lord?" is found in Acts 22:10. And it is "what shall I do, Lord?" What is your will for my life? Now that I know you, what do you want of me?

Joseph Bailey, who is the President of a Christian college said if there is a serious concern among Christian students today it is for guidance. Holiness may have been the passion of another generation or soul winning or evangelizing the world – and I would add those things remain passions of young people today, but he says today the basic

theme of Christian students' questions concern knowing the will of God. What do you want me to do, Lord?

It is the case that it is not only the basic theme of what college students ask, but it is the basic theme of what middle-aged people ask, retirees—there are folks in their 60's that I know who have completed their careers, they have a pension coming in from the State or from the military, and they are in the same place as someone who is 20 years old. They are saying, "What does God want me to do with the rest of my life?"

I think the reason why knowing God's will is such a pressing concern for people living in the 90's in a way that it wasn't as pressing a concern for people living a hundred years ago is because of the range of options that are now available to almost everyone living in America. A hundred years ago, even 40 years ago, there were so many limits on what a person could do simply because of life's circumstances and cultural expectations that folks didn't struggle with God's will in the way that we struggle today. 100 years ago, generally a man would take the occupation of his father or whomever his father apprenticed to. If dad was a farmer, you were going to be a farmer too. If dad owned a store, you would probably work in his store from the time you were little. If dad saw that you had some potential, he might apprentice you to someone else at the age of 12 or 13.

If you were a woman, even up until just a few decades ago your life track was basically to be a wife and a mother. The notion of having a career or even more serving in the church in a significant way in leadership, in teaching, in full-time ministry, wasn't available 30 years ago.

A life in the 90's really is a life with a multiplicity of options. Sometimes the options are overwhelming. A few months ago I had a bad cold and I went to Kroger's to get some cold medicine. There was an entire aisle at Kroger's devoted just to cold medicines. There must have been, no joke, 300 products for a cold. I stared at this array, this blinding array of cold medicines—decongestants, antihistamines, expectorants, coughs due to cold, a.m.'s and p.m.'s, step 1 and step 4's, generic brands, pills, capsules, tablets, drinks, alcoholic, non-alcoholic, extra-strength, fast acting, slow acting.

You know what I did? I looked over that whole array of choices and I just stood there paralyzed. I started to laugh and I walked out not having bought anything. I couldn't figure out what to do, so I didn't do anything. I just shrugged my shoulders and laughed and suffered with my cold. I needed a consultant for buying cough medicine.

I think that is where a lot of people in your generation are at right now. There is such a blinding, dizzying array of life options. Folks are so mobile. You could work in Central Ohio, or you could work in California. You could work in Australia. You can do just about anything that you want to do. You can go to school, go to college, go to graduate school, take a Bible program through a church like VLI here or Bible college or seminary, get married, don't get married, have kids, don't have kids, watch the kids, hire someone to watch the kids. It is all so incredibly overwhelming.

And then if you hear people talk about God's will, they throw you into even more bondage. I remember listening to a teacher once talk about how God's will was always an offense to your mind. God's will always contradicted what you thought. You thought

God was up to this in your life – Ha Ha, he’s not. It is just a giant shell game. Like those kids on NY streets, you know, find which shell the pea is under. Whoops, you missed it. This guy was basically teaching that God’s will was always contrary to what you thought. You thought God wanted you to marry this woman? Nah – you got it wrong. Let’s see what is behind door #1 for this loser, a lifetime of misery with the wrong woman. Well, God’s will is contrary to what you desire.

There is a very sweet couple that I know after enormously hard work have a pretty decent marriage. But the reason they married each other is because they believed that God wanted them to be with someone they didn’t want to be with. They were so contrary to each other’s desires that they said, “This must be God, because this relationship will mature me and strengthen me spiritually.” And it has.

Some people teach that God doesn’t even have an individual will for your life. There is a horrible book out, and I generally don’t mention my negative reflections on books, but there is a particularly bad book that you want to avoid called *Decision Making and the Will of God* by Gary Freeson. Freeson takes 450 pages to try to prove a case against God having an individual will for your life. He essentially says that it is up to you. Figure out what you want to do and do that.

Here is the problem, friends. With such a dizzying array of options open to people in the 90’s and with such contradictory counsel from seemingly mature believers, I meet person after person who is in incredible bondage concerning the will of God for their life. On the one hand there are those people who are absolutely paralyzed like I was standing in the cough syrup aisle. They feel like they need a revelation to move forward.

Imagine a woman who is in love with a man. They both have a great deal in common. They both are putting Jesus Christ first in their lives. They both are seeking the Kingdom of God above everything else. She enjoys this guy’s company. He is bright. He has good job skills. He is basically a healed, whole person. All of her friends, her family, feel great about her getting married, but she hasn’t received a revelation and so she is paralyzed. She is frozen. She waits and waits and waits because she doesn’t know God’s will.

And I see people do that with ministry all the time. A person is gifted. There are opportunities and they have a heart’s desire to do ministry. Other people are confirming it. The doors are open, there is blessing and success, but they are frozen. I don’t know what God wants. So I see great bondage before people make a decision.

And then I see great bondage after people make a decision. Or they are constantly reevaluating and introspecting and saying, “Did I do the right thing? Did I marry the person God wanted me to marry? Did I make a mistake? Yeah, I prayed and I asked, but my motives weren’t pure. And I am not sure God could get through to me anyway.” And so people pick at their decisions over and over again.

Here is what I want to do with today’s talk. I want to liberate you and set you free from so many of the fears that you have, the anxiety, the bondage that you suffer under that you will somehow miss God’s will for your life even though you want to hear it. I am going to share with you five liberating thoughts that I believe will set you free from your paralysis, from your fear that God is going to play a big shell game with your life,

that if you are not nipping at God's heels at every moment, if you turn your head at any moment you will miss it. That that window will close and you will forever be consigned to something less than God's perfect will for your life.

I am going to share with you five thoughts that if you embrace these things can assist you for the rest of your life in making godly decisions that will honor the Lord and bring blessing to you. I have called this morning's talk, *Liberating Thoughts Regarding God's Will for Your Life*. Let's pray.

Here is liberating thought #1: Your confidence in discovering God's will for your life is not in your ability to follow, but in God's willingness to lead. See, the starting point of getting liberated from bondage regarding knowing the will of God concerns knowing God. Remember Paul's first question was "Who are you, Lord?" Before Paul asked "What do you want me to do?" he asked, "Who are you, Lord Jesus?"

And honestly, I think that many of us have such a defective view of God that it is no wonder that we are afraid of missing His will for our lives. I was joking earlier about God playing a giant shell game with us, but that is the view that so many people have. At bottom, that is what you fear. You are trying to follow God. You are trying to pray. You are trying to obey and you reach for one shell – whoops, no pea under there. You missed. What is behind door #2, the lion. I have heard teachers actually say that we have to nip at God's heels because he is moving so quickly that if you don't stay up with Him He is just going to bless someone else.

Liberation concerning the will of God starts with a basic knowledge of how good a leader Jesus is. Listen to what Jesus says in John 10: "I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice." Jesus used this figure of speech, but they didn't understand what he was telling them. Jesus went on to say, 'The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.'" He goes on to say in v. 27, "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand."

Do you understand what Jesus is getting at here? Throughout the text Jesus is saying that He takes the same kind of responsibility for His people that a good shepherd takes for His sheep. Part of the responsibility of a good shepherd was to lead the sheep where the sheep needed to go. And a good shepherd in ancient Palestine wouldn't just race up ahead and basically say to the sheep, "Hey, you guys better keep up with me. If you wander off and nibble grass in another pasture and don't keep up with me, forget you. You will spend your life at the bottom of a cliff somewhere or stuck in some thorns or brambles." It was the responsibility of the shepherd to make sure his sheep got to where he was leading.

And he would take whatever measures necessary short of killing the sheep to lead them safely from one pasture to another. If a sheep was straying from the fold, shepherds in ancient Palestine used to use a sling and a rock and fling it right by the nose of the sheep so that the sheep would be startled and race back to the fold.

I love the fact that Jesus compares His leadership to being a shepherd of sheep. Not the fox master of foxes. Sheep are the proto-type of stupid animals. They are exceedingly stupid. They have no sense of direction. They can scarcely find their feet without the help of the shepherd, much less find their way. And so when Jesus wants to communicate this principle that God takes both the initiative and the responsibility to get through to you however stupid you are, however lost and directionless, He uses the image of a shepherd and a sheep.

Do you get it? You don't quite get this yet. My confidence in living in the will of God is not based on my great followership. It is based on His incredible leadership. I am not so confident in my capacity to hear, but I am very confident that my leader, Jesus, can speak loud enough so that I will get the message.

Do you understand that you don't have to be a super hero to find God's will? All you have to be is a sheep, just a follower. If you begin to allow your heart to rest on a solid knowledge of who God is then you can be free from so many different fears and bondages concerning the will of God. Like the fear that if you make a decision in faith, praying about it, and really wanting to do God's will, that you constantly have to reevaluate later on because you will find out that it was really outside of God's will. You don't have to rehash decisions over and over. And even if you learn something later that you didn't know at the time, and had you known it, you would not have made that decision, you can trust that God led you even then. You asked to do His will; you were willing to do His will; you are a sheep; it is His responsibility to guide and to initiate and give you the information that you need for the decision.

You say, "Well, if God is so willing to lead me, why is it such a problem for me to get clear on what He wants?"

One of the struggles that we have is that we are passionate about getting information from God and God is far more passionate about formation in our lives. We want information, God wants formation. We want to know what kind of car we are to drive. God is far more interested in the person who drives the car. We want to know what kind of earring to wear. God is far more interested in your hearing than in your earring.

Bobby Clinton wrote a book a few years ago called *The Making of a Leader*. It is a great book. I would encourage you to pick up a copy of it if you are interested in leadership. But in this book, *The Making of a Leader*, Clinton goes through the formative steps that God uses, the processes that God engages in, in making someone into a Christian leader. And he says that from his studies of hundreds and hundreds of people most of what God is doing with people in their 20's is tons of integrity checks. He is forming character for a lifetime of service. He is calling you to deal with issues of integrity where you cut corners, where you quit when it is difficult, will you be faithful in little, can you deal with life outside the limelight, outside the spotlight, do you always have to get credit, do you always have to get a pat on the back, do you always have to

be thanked for everything, do you always have to get your own way, can you submit to someone else, can you follow someone else's vision, even though it is not your vision? Integrity check, integrity check, integrity check.

And God is ruthless about leading us into formation. And we struggle because we want information.

In my 20's I started a Bible study on Thursday night at this little church here in town. At the time I had just started my career teaching law at OSU. We just had a baby. There was a lot of pressure from work. I was doing a bunch of ministry things—teaching on Sunday mornings at the predecessor to this church. And so I had this Bible study going on on Thursday nights. For one reason or another everybody basically dropped out of the group until there was just three of us. I was teaching two other people on Thursday nights. The third week of this I was so frustrated inside and thinking, "This is just an enormous waste of time, forget this." I remember the Lord arrested my attention one evening when I was particularly grumbling about preparing a study for these two other people. He stopped me and this question formed in my mind: Well, who are you doing this Bible study for, Rich?

I said, "Well, for you Lord, I am doing it for you."

And so then he said, "Well, then, why do you care how many people are here?"

Integrity check time. Before you are going to lead 3000 people, you get used to doing things for Jesus when there are only three people.

I am not saying, by the way, that if you have a group that is dying on the vine that you shouldn't ask God is it OK to close this group down or to make some changes. I am just saying that God is relentlessly forming a certain kind of heart in us. A heart that is not in bondage to how many people we have around us or in how successful we appear in our own eyes or in the eyes of someone else. Part of the reason we struggle with God's will is we forget what He is after. He is after forming us.

And we want instant answers. I need to know what I am going to do and I need to know by lunch today. And God has all the time in the world. He knows He is a great leader. You may not be confident of His leadership, but God knows that He is the universe's best leader. And part of leadership is taking a really long view of what it is going to take to get a person to where you want them to be.

You know, the older I get and the more time I spend pastoring, the longer the term is that I think about in terms of giving counsel to young men and women regarding what to do with their lives. I can't tell you how many guys I have talked with who are in their mid-30's who work for some para-church organization for some incredibly low slave wages when they were in their early 20's. Maybe they worked with college kids. Maybe they did a halfway house. Maybe they did a prison ministry. Maybe they went overseas for 8 months or 5 years. But they didn't go to school or college, they didn't do any vocational training. And somewhere around 28 or 29 they met a girl and got married. Now they have two kids, they are 35 years old, they have no marketable skills, they are working for \$5.75 an hour and they come to me and say, "Hey, I want to be in ministry. Could you give me a job in the church?"

I say, "What can you do?"

“Well, I can run a halfway house. I can play the guitar real good. I can do street theater. I worked on a ship.”

I say, “Well, I don’t own a ship and we don’t do a lot of street theater that we need to hire someone for.”

There is nothing sadder, I tell you friends, than talking with a guy who is in his late 30’s who has his hat in hand and a couple of kids and saying to that person, “I don’t have anything for you.” You know, I get really angry with the older people in organizations that use people’s youth. They get someone charged up for a very short term. There is no long-term developmental plan for the person’s life. There is no plan for how we are going to get you to age 30 or age 40. There is no counsel regarding building a foundation for the rest of your life. There are no marketable skills so that you can put bread on the table.

We are the fathers who will counsel people for the long game. But do you know that God is a good father? He is not only interested in the next day, the next year, what He can squeeze out of you right this minute, what He can use you for. He is interested in capturing you for a lifetime.

I did a message here at church a few months ago that I called “Picking a Mate for a Lifetime” – how to pick a great husband or a great wife for a lifetime. If you are thinking about what are the issues regarding how to pick a good mate, you may want to pick up that tape in the bookstore. One of the points that I made which is so consistent with God’s leadership is that picking a mate takes a lot of time. The number one mistake that people make in deciding to get married is that they don’t take enough time to consider their decision. Proverbs 19:2 says “It is not good to have zeal without knowledge nor be hasty and miss the way.” Someone did a study that indicated that the longer people dated the more likely it was that they would have a successful and stable marriage. And the shorter they dated the much higher degree of likelihood of failure if they courted and got married, especially if they got married within six months of initially dating.

You have this enormously important decision to make for the rest of your life. Don’t you want to take the time to figure out if this is just hormones speaking? If it is just infatuation? Or if you and your potential mate have what it takes to make your love last for a lifetime? When you meet someone who has a cute smile, medically speaking, your brain short-circuits. It takes time to watch how another person handles pressure, how they handle money, whether you can work through conflicts. You need to see the car off the showroom floor. When I buy cars I don’t just look at them on the showroom floor. I take them out for a test drive. And you better believe when I am test-driving that car I am slamming on the brakes. I am driving over backcountry roads and letting that thing fly and bouncing in the car and spinning the wheel. Can it take the pressure? Does it handle well? God takes lots of time.

Here is the third thing that we struggle with regarding God’s leadership. We want an entire life plan. Not only do we want things instantly, but also when God does speak instantly we want Him to give us an entire life’s plan. And God mostly guides step by step. A good shepherd just walks a few paces in front of the sheep and step-by-step leads them to another pasture.

Psalm 119 says, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” If you have ever walked in the woods at night with a flashlight you know that you don’t just hold the light up in the air to watch the road 75 yards away because you will bang into every branch and fall into every hole and trip over every rock along the way. O sure, occasionally you will want to see down the road a piece, but by and large you shine that beam only 3 or 4 feet in front of you.

That is the way of the Lord. Every so often he will pick up the flashlight and show you down the road 75 yards. But I will tell you friends, that is an incredibly rare experience. It will only happen every so often in your life that he will shine the flashlight down and give you the picture of the big callings, the major directions. Most of the time it is step by step. Should I go to college or not? I feel like I am supposed to take this next step and apply to college. Now I am in college. What major should I take? Well, I have taken these classes and I really enjoy this. So step by step I decide on a major. Then I get some work experience. And step by step one thing leads to another and I find myself working in a place. All the while I can trust the Good Shepherd leading me because He is such a good leader and I am inviting His leadership into my life.

Liberating thought #2: You can hear God’s will if you are willing to hear it. Jesus is a great leader and He says in John 10, “My sheep hear my voice. I call them by name and lead them out.”

You say, “I don’t really hear God that well. Maybe He does speak. I can trust Him to speak, but I don’t hear Him very well.”

Let me share with you why at least the vast majority of you may be struggling with hearing the voice of God. And again, I think it really has to do with your basic confidence in who God is. I remember one time I was reading in the gospel of John. I came upon John 5:19. Here is what it said, “Jesus gave this answer, ‘I tell you the truth the Son can do nothing by himself, he can only do what he sees the Father doing. Because whatever the Father does the Son also does.’”

I was reading John 5:19, “...The Son can do nothing of himself or by himself, he can only do what he sees the Father doing.” I remember getting really discouraged as I knelt down.

The Lord said, “Well read v. 20.”

V. 20 says, “For the Father loves the Son and he shows him everything that he is doing.” At that moment the Lord began speaking to me and he said, “Your problem is that you can’t hear my voice. But your real problem is that you don’t have confidence that I love you enough to show you everything that I am doing.”

Here is what I am saying, men and women, if you struggle with wanting to hear God’s voice but feel like everyone hears it better than you, even if you are praying for people and you never get words or never have confidence in having a prophetic word, much less the subject that I am talking about which is finding God’s will for your life. If you struggle with hearing God’s voice, I would encourage you to not begin with, “O God, I need to hear you better” but “O God, I need to know your love for me better.” See it is confidence in God’s love for you that opens you up to hear. We don’t hear so that we might know His love. We love so that we might hear. I have seen this at work in my life over and over again. When I have a restful trust in God’s love for me, I can hear really

well. I get prophetic words, I get words of knowledge. I really feel like I am in touch with what God is saying and doing.

When I am very anxious and uptight and I feel defective and that there is something wrong with my wiring; I am too logical; I am too analytical, I can't hear anything. So it goes back to what I was saying at the beginning. Before we say to God, "What do you want me to do?" we need to say, "Who are you?" and allow the Lord to reveal Himself to us as the lover of our souls. The one who wants to talk and bring you into His confidence. God speaks to us because He loves us.

And God speaks to us because He forgives us. Over and over in the Bible we read that God speaks to people who are cleansed and forgiven of their sins. This is the new covenant. In Jeremiah 31, Jeremiah says, "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time. [This is the new covenant, listen to this] I will put my laws in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor nor a man his brother saying, 'Know the Lord' because they will all know me from the least of them to the greatest."

Jeremiah promises a time when God's voice will echo in your heart. Who gets to hear the voice of God echoing in their heart? 31:34, "For I will forgive their wickedness and I will remember their sins no more." God speaks to the forgiven. To people whose hearts have been freed up from the guilt of their past actions.

You know while you have a log jam of past guilt in your life about your sexual past, or your past in partying, or the fact that you really didn't recommit your life to Jesus until very recently—while you have a log jam of past guilt and shame, it is going to be very difficult to hear the voice of God. That log jam needs to be cleared out.

I said last week at church that there are just two great alternatives regarding God. Either God notes every one of your sins and holds you accountable for all of them, or God takes responsibility for what you have done and says, "I will pay for what you have done. Charge it all to my account." Either God requires you to pay the bill or God pays the bill. But there is no middle ground. There are only two alternatives regarding God. Have you charged your sins to the account of Jesus? If you have, then let him pay and stop trying to pay.

Psalms 130:3 says, "O Lord, if you kept a record of sins, who could stand? But with the Lord there is forgiveness."

And the reason I outline the issue of feeling forgiven is because to the extent that you keep getting tied and hooked by your past, your failures, your sins, you won't be able to hear the voice of God regarding His direction in your life. What you will hear is the voice of accusation, the voice of judgment, the voice of failure. And all that needs to be washed away.

God speaks to the forgiven. And God speaks not only to His loved ones and to those who have been forgiven, but He speaks to the willing. Romans 12:1-2 says this, "Therefore, I urge your brothers [sisters], in view of God's mercy offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God. This is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind."

I heard him say, "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, then you will be able to test and approve of what God's will is, his good, pleasing and perfect will."

This passage makes an incredible promise about the will of God. That we will be able to test and approve of what it is. That word "test" literally means the process of purifying metal in a furnace and testing its strength. The idea is that as we live we will more and more experience knowing God's will and we will have the strength to do it as we know it. It is the same kind of promise that I talked with you about in liberating thought #1 – that God is such a good leader that He can get through to people like us. This passage has two conditions on us really being able to know God's will in our experience.

The first condition is that we present our bodies as living sacrifices. This is the commitment of your whole being to the Lord. This word "present" is written in a tense that indicates a one time action that has continuing force. Here is the idea. It is like your wedding day where you offer yourself to this other person. My one-time presentation of myself that will have consequences for the rest of my life. And this is what we do when we get converted. We present our bodies, our whole being to Jesus. This one time act of surrender that has continuing force for the rest of our lives.

So the first condition that Paul lays on us in hearing God's voice is total surrender at some point in your life. And then he speaks of daily surrender. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed. And the tense of this is daily action, not a one time action, but daily action. When we are not conformed to the world that means we strive to put off those things that we know are against the will of God. That is the negative side.

The positive side is that you constantly yield your mind to the control of Jesus. The bottom line is that God reveals His will to those who surrender and are willing. To those who don't put up a whole bunch of conditions. Well, I will hear you God, but only if you speak to me in this and this and this way about these four things. It is speak, Lord, your servant hears. I give you a blank check of my life and I say to you that you can write anything you want in it. You can ask anything you want of me.

Have you ever done that with the Lord? Have you said, "God, whatever you want. Wherever you call me to. Whatever you call me to, I am willing to follow."

You say, "Oh, I am afraid to do that because I know what God will call me to."

You need to be released from the bondage of fear. God loves you. He wants your very best. God forgives you. God wishes to speak to you.

It is here on this issue of willingness that I think some of us get into a new kind of bondage. We start introspecting and say, "I don't know if I am really willing. I want to be. I am trying to be. But I see that I have mixed motives."

There is a great devotional writer, F.B. Meyer who shared what I think is a very unfortunate view of how pure you need to be before you can hear God's voice. F.B. Meyer said, "So long as there is some thought of personal advantage, some idea of acquiring the praise and accommodation of man, some aim at self-aggrandizement, it will be impossible to find out God's purpose concerning us. The door must be resolutely shut against all these if we are to hear the still small voice."

If I believe what F.B. Meyer was saying, I could never do anything for God because my motives are never absolutely clean. Whenever I get up to speak there is at least a thought in my mind regarding I wonder how you guys are receiving this whether it is helping or not helping, whether you are going to appreciate it. There is a part of me that is always selfish. So we pray and say, "God, give me a clean heart. Give me an overriding desire for your honor and your glory. Give me a passion to seek first the kingdom and your righteousness. Give me an undivided heart that I may do your will."

But understand this, friends, until you die there is going to be sin in your heart. If it required absolute purity and complete lack of division in order to hear God's voice, none of us would hear it. So those of you who have a sensitive conscience, hear me now. I am not authorizing sin or saying that it is no big deal, do whatever you feel. But I am saying that God is greater than your heart. And if you are surrendered and you desire to do the will of God with your mix, you can hear God's voice.

All that I have been saying presupposes that you are praying and you are asking God to speak to you. I know that many, many folks struggle knowing the will of God. There was a missionary who challenged a group of young people one time saying, "How many of you spend even five or ten minutes a day in concentrated seeking of God's will for your life?" You wonder about it. You talk with people about it. But how many of you spend 5-10 minutes a day in concentrated seeking of God's will for your life?

Proverbs 2 says, "My son, if you accept my words and store up my commands within you, turning your ear to wisdom and applying your heart to understanding, if you call out for insights and cry aloud for understanding and if you look for it as for silver and search for it as for hidden treasure, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God. For the Lord gives wisdom and out of his mouth comes knowledge and understanding. Then you will understand what is right and just and fair and every good path and wisdom will enter your heart." So you need to get on your face before God and cry out to Him if you want to know His will.

Here is liberating thought #3: God's will is generally consistent with your deepest desires and your spiritual gifts.

Why can you sign a blank check with the Lord? Why can you do Romans 12 about being willing to do His will and to present your body as a sacrifice? Why? Because you are presenting it to one who created you with certain desires and formed your heart and put in you certain gifts and redemption.

Of course, our desires get changed over time as we walk with God and as we soak our minds in God's word. That is what the whole business of not being conformed to this world, but transforming our minds has to do with. It is soaking your mind in the word of God. But as your mind gets soaked in God's word, you can have basic confidence that God wants you to fulfill the deepest desires of your heart.

Again, this comes back to knowing God. Some people think that God's will for their lives must be the exact opposite of their deepest desires. They think that God's will and their sanctified desires, I am not talking about your worldly, unregenerate, not soaked in the Bible desires, but your deepest spiritual desires regarding God's kingdom and life, some people think that God's will and their deepest desires will never coincide.

I heard a story about a man called Joe who hated his job painting houses. Some people would really love to paint houses. But for him, it was total drudgery. He found himself struggling constantly with grumbling about it, totally counter to everything he wanted to do. This fellow was asked, "Well, Joe, if you could do anything you wanted to do in life, what would you do?" He said, "Oh, that's easy, I would teach High School students English."

So his pastor said, "Well, Joe, why don't you go back to school and finish up your degree and try to teach English so that you could have a job that you could be able to pursue with your passion and your energy?"

Joe said, "Ah, I could never do that because I would love the experience too much and I just couldn't handle the kids' affirmation. I would get so full of pride."

And the clincher was he said that he knew God wanted him to paint houses because he thoroughly disliked it. This is an extreme, but there really is this bondage of thought that God's will must be the opposite of my inclinations and my desires. Do you understand that if you are redeemed that God is at work in you creating desires for His will for His life? It is not just that God's will is out there, abstractly, and that you have to run after it. Philippians 2 [note this down]:12-13 says, "Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose."

That word "for work" in v. 13 where it says, "For it is God who works in you..." that word in Greek is *Energeo* from which we get the word "energy" from. Paul is literally saying that God is energizing you on the inside in the direction of His will. He is motivating you. He is giving you the inspiration that you need to desire to agree with His will.

God is forming in you desires which will move you in the direction in which He wants you to go in. And you see this over and over again in the New Testament. Paul says in 1 Timothy 3, "Here is a trustworthy saying. If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task." If what is in your heart is to be a Christian leader, that is a good thing. Some people feel bad about that. "Oh my, I really shouldn't want to be a leader." If that is in your heart, and you are soaking your mind in the word and you are praying, you can trust that that heart has been energized by God's work in your life.

Or how about this one. 1 Corinthians 7, Paul says that since there is so much immorality each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband. He goes on to say, "To the unmarried, I say it is good for you to stay unmarried. But if you can't control yourself, you should marry."

Do you get it? Paul is saying that one of the indicators of whether God wants you to get married at some point is that you have really strong sexual desires that God wants you to fulfill. We say, "No. I have these strong sexual desires. I wonder what God's will is?" Well, maybe it is for you to get married. Now, that is not the basis of a marriage. I want to carefully say that we are not talking about feeding your lust. I am talking about the sanctified mind that is soaked in God's word. You are praying and going after God. But you have the strong desire. It is an indicator of the will of God.

Now, I will tell you friends, that no one told me that my sanctified desires were an indicator of God's will. And that my lack of desire in a certain area might also be an

indicator of God's will. For years I operated under the presupposition that because a certain area of ministry was right to do, that was probably God's will for me even though I really had no desire in that direction and my inclination and desires were in a totally other direction.

Let me give you an example from my own life. When I was in college, I began reading a lot of material about ministry to the poor. And I got several magazines that had a real social action orientation. I read a number of books on the poor. I discovered in the scriptures God's desire and will to have Christians reach out to the poor.

It is absolutely appropriate to begin to pray about areas that you discover in God's word and to ask God to shape your heart because he will probably have something for you in that area. But that doesn't mean that it is a life calling or a major commitment of all of your energy or all of your time.

Well, I didn't know how to process all of this. I just saw God's call to the poor. And so my senior year of college I decided I was going to get involved with the poor. I started to work down in an inner city mission in Cleveland. I taught Bible studies for my whole senior year at this mission. I played basketball with these kids. Half of them were much better than me. Some of them were 14 years old and could dunk. And then when I went to law school I had it in my mind the whole time that the reason to go to law school was so that I could do some legal work for the poor. Again, this wasn't really my desire, but it is what I thought was right.

I kept on that track, even to the point of moving into the inner city for four years with my wife and my kids. After years of doing this – I am a very slow learner – I had this liberating thought that it would be OK to God if I didn't live in the inner city. That He wasn't upset with me. That I wasn't failing Him. I just wasn't particularly effective there. It was really my desire. My desire was to work with university students.

Let me share with you a really important principle at this point. And the principle is that God does not need your noble sacrifice to Him. In fact, every time you get this thing in your mind, "Isn't it noble what I am doing? I am giving myself to world missions. It is so noble. I am so heroic." That is the opposite of humility. Humility means simply to submit to God's will. But if you think of something as your big sacrifice to God, it doesn't flow out of your heart and out of your deepest desires, it is just up here, "This is right" – I am not talking about God's moral will, the commandments of God, you do because they are right whatever is going on inside. And you pray that your heart will follow along behind." What I am talking about is this non-moral gray areas – what job to take, what ministry to be involved in, what school to go to, what major to take – God doesn't need your big sacrifice. What He is looking for is your obedience. As Hebrews 10:6 says, "With burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. Then I said 'Here I am. It is written about me in the scroll. I have come to do your will O God.'"

He just wants you willing to do His will. He doesn't want your sacrifice. And so many folks are burned out on the mission field after a year or two years because that was never their deepest heart's desire. They never were being energized internally by the Holy Spirit in this direction. They just had this view that it was right and that it would be a noble thing to do.

And I believe all of this comes back to this view of God. Remember your first question is “Who are you, Lord?” Before Paul asks “What do you want me to do?” it is “Who are you, Lord?” And so we come back to this idea that Jesus is a good shepherd. In John 10 he says, “I am not a thief. The thief comes to kill and wound and destroy. But I came to give life and to give it abundantly.” Do you want a liberating thought? Jesus is not a thief. Folks think, “If I really open my life up to Jesus and really surrender everything He is just going to steal stuff. He will rip me off. He will take my deepest desires and just frustrate them. I will spend my life doing what I don’t want, but I will have to do it because it is right.”

Someone once said, “Jesus is the exact opposite of a thief. When He breaks into your house, He leaves stuff behind.” He puts a nice clock on the mantel over your fireplace. He sets up a vase of flowers. You open up your refrigerator – “Wow, there is a pie in there. Who left that?” Jesus left it because he comes to give and not to steal. Anytime you let Christ in he is coming to give.

So God’s will is generally consistent with your deepest desires and with your spiritual gifts. Remember before I said that God reveals His will to the willing? I want you to see this insight in Romans 12 that I think a lot of you have not seen before. We read Romans 12:1-2, “Therefore, I urge you brothers in view of God’s mercy to offer your bodies as living sacrifices.” I said to you that we first of all have to present ourselves to Jesus in a one-time act of ultimate surrender and then day by day yield our minds to God. We put off the garbage of what flows into our minds from the world and we put on a transformed mind, a mind soaked in God’s word.

But Paul says that if you surrender to God you will approve of and be able to test and know His will. And then he immediately flows into a text regarding spiritual gifts. Immediately after telling us to surrender ourselves and therefore we will be able to know God’s will, Paul says “For by the grace given me, I said to everyone of you don’t think of yourself more highly, but think with sober judgment, each according with a measure of faith that God has given you.”

He goes on and says that we have different gifts according to the grace given us. “If a man’s gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve. If it is teaching, let him teach. If it is encouragement, let him encourage.” And so on.

See, part of knowing God’s will is examining your gifts. How has God gifted you? What is your deepest desire? That is one thing you should ask when you are trying to figure out God’s will. What is your deepest desire as you have yielded yourself to God and what are your gifts?

Let me give you a couple of handles in figuring out what your gifts are because many of you would say, “I haven’t a clue” regarding what your spiritual gifts are. There are many of you who would say, “I don’t know what my spiritual gifts are” so how can I find God’s will by examining them? Let me give you a few handles for figuring out what your gifts are. This is something that has evolved over time. Where I am at 41 is really different than when I was 21.

One of the things that you will want to do is just look at where you experience great joy and effectiveness. I believe a good liberating principle regarding where God wants

you to be is where you feel great joy and where are you really fruitful. There are some things for me which make me go off like a bottle rocket. And one of those things is evangelism. I get so stimulated in seeing someone come to know Jesus. I love it. And I am reasonably, not phenomenally effective, but reasonably effective at explaining the gospel and watching people come in. The Lord does save and has consistently saved through me over the last 20 years.

I very much enjoy explaining God's word and I always have. I am a natural teacher. And I find joy and effectiveness in leading. So for me my lead gifts are leading and teaching and a subordinate gifting is evangelism.

Where do you experience joy? What makes you go off like a bottle rocket in ministry, in job skills, in thinking? Where is your joy? Where is your effectiveness? And, of course, effectiveness is not just a subjective thing. Effectiveness is something the body evaluates.

Now it is not necessarily the case that you ought to take a job or career based on your spiritual gifts alone. Otherwise, everyone would go into Christian ministry. Sometimes people don't have the desire for that. Sometimes the opportunity is not there. And most of you will end up working secular jobs and serving in the church as you can. And that is as it should be because we don't want all the salt in the salt shaker. We want it distributed around.

Well, here is liberating thought #4: God provides others to help you with your decision, but they are not there to make your decision.

It is important to remember that you are a member of a body. When Jesus calls a person He doesn't just call a person to Himself. John Wimber speaks often about three callings of a Christian. We are called, first of all, to Christ to be saved by Him, to enjoy His life and love. Then Christ calls us to the church to be membered in a body and to commit yourself to a physical church with real leaders. We live in such an individualistic time that a lot of people feel called to Christ but don't feel called to the church. That is like being called to play offensive tackle, but I don't really play on any particular football team. I am called to be a basketball center, but I really don't like to play on a team at all. I play first chair violin, but not in any particular orchestra. It is absolutely unthinkable that you would spend your life unconnected to a church with real leaders. Not just a church of your own making where you get to hang out with just a few people you like, but a church that is multi-generational and full-orbed. It has all of the biblical purposes of church worked out in them—worship, evangelism, world missions, biblical preaching, community expressed in small groups.

Christ calls to Himself. Christ calls us to the church. And Christ calls us to His great cause. His great cause is spreading the kingdom of God through the world via evangelism and world missions.

Well, the body can offer significant help in assisting us in making a decision. It is here that I want to speak about the role of prophecy in assisting you in making your decision. You know, in the Bible many decisions were encouraged through prophetic words. For example, in Acts 13 it says, "In the church in Antioch there were prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simion called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. While they were worshipping the Lord

and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.' [And I believe the Holy Spirit said that through a word of prophecy.] So after they fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off."

Now, prophecy can be one of the greatest blessings or one of the greatest curses for you in determining what God's will is for you in your life. I think there is a good reason why Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5, "Do not despise prophecy." That is because after you have gotten burned several times with bad prophetic words where someone has led you astray through a prophecy that you would tend to despise it. The fact is prophecy is always going to be mixed. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 13 that "We know in part and we prophecy in part." And we have to test all things (1 Thessalonians 5:19). We have to test all things and hold fast to that which is good. But earnest people can give bad words because they have soulish desires for your life. They are not able to distinguish God's voice from their own thoughts.

My dear friend, Danny Meyer, who is the associate pastor at this church, was prophesied over some years ago about some having a ministry in an Arab country. They saw him surrounded by women who had veils and he was caring for children. He has had virtually no interest in ever being in any kind of Middle Eastern religions and the last thing in the world that Danny would ever want to find himself doing is Children's Ministry. But this was the prophetic word. And everybody else was getting all these really accurate words and Danny got this one.

If you think that receiving a prophecy automatically means that this is God's will for your life, then you are going to end up in an Arab country somewhere caring for kids wholly apart from God's will. Over the years, I have received literally hundreds – I am not exaggerating – I have received literally hundreds of inaccurate prophecies concerning my life. I remember a strongly prophetic individual in a conference setting stood me up and said, "Thus sayeth the Lord, 'Go west, young man, go west.'" And then I received a bunch of words about how I was being called to go to Vineyard Anaheim. I had no inclination in that direction. God had not said anything personally to me about that. But people were sending me words and they had dreams about me going to Vineyard Anaheim.

So, how do we sort through all of this? How do we think about prophecies that were spoken over our life in the past or may be spoken over our life in the future? As a general rule, and you can write this down; personal directional words of prophecy ought to be followed only when they underline or confirm what God is already saying to you. Personal or directional words of prophecy ought to be followed only when they underline or confirm what God is already saying to you.

I like to think about prophecy as being like a yellow highlighter. God is already saying something. He is speaking to you through your desires, through counsel, through your giftings, or you have been praying about something, you have an inner impression that this is what God wants and then that word of prophecy comes and it highlights what the Lord is already doing. It communicates, "this is me" – it is not just you, son. It is not just your desire, daughter, it is me. It is like God just lights it on fire.

That is what God has done in my life on a number of occasions. He has taken a prophetic word from somebody else and set my desire on fire.

Let me highlight a principle here for you. You are responsible for what you do with your life and what you do with the talents that God has given you. And you will not be able to stand on the last day and say to God, "God, well this prophetic person told me to go in this direction, so that's what I did because I thought it was you."

The Lord is going to say to you, "You were responsible to pray and seek my face and find out what I personally wanted for your life. You can't pass that off to some prophet."

So many people are running around it is almost like a "Dial-A-Prophecy" sort of thing. Well you know, a prophetic person is in town and maybe they will prophecy over my life and tell me where to go and what to do. No, all they can do is highlight. And if you give them any more authority in your life other than highlighting and confirming, you are giving them too much authority, because you are responsible before God regarding what you do with your life.

What if you get a word from a prophet and it is not anything you have ever thought about? What should you do with that?

Well, if it is completely weird, I would just put it on a shelf and say to God, "God, if you ever want to bring that to pass, so be it. But this isn't even on my radar screen." On the other hand, sometimes the Lord will use that as a little nudge in your life. Wow – I never really thought about that, but I feel inclined to really pray over that. And so you spread it before the Lord and allow God to either confirm it in your heart or not confirm it. Again, the final arbiter is what God says to you by His Spirit alone and not through another person. Occasionally, God will use a prophetic word to bring into your life something that you hadn't thought about, but that you need to think about. But He will always confirm it in your heart just between you and Him alone.

Now, I have shared with you some bad instances of prophecy. Let me share with you some good instances. Let me tell you my own story about how I moved from teaching law at Ohio State to pastoring here at Vineyard Columbus. I had been in leadership here at VCF Columbus for a number of years and was overseeing our preaching ministry and our leadership team. But I was very insecure about what God's will was for my life regarding making a move from Ohio State to here. I really was brought to a crossroads in that something needed to give. The church was beginning to grow and I could not continue being bi-vocational for an extended period of time. I was working 70-75 hours every week. Work all week at my job at OSU and run a couple of groups. And then spend all day Saturday preparing a message and then preach on Sunday. It was beginning to take its toll.

Well, I went to England to serve on a prayer ministry team. I was walking around a park at the conference site with a friend and just sharing with him my frustration and dilemma at not knowing what God's will was – no one had done a talk like this in which I was liberated to really examine my deepest desires and liberated to examine my gifts, and liberated to hear God's voice – I was really struggling at that time with knowing what God's will was. And my friend said, "Well, why not put a fleece before God?"

I said, "Well, I don't do that. That is kind of an immature way of testing God's will." And as a general rule, I do think that that is something of an immature way of testing God's will. You see it with Gideon in the Old Testament. Some people ask for radically impossible things to happen before they will do what God wants them to do. "God, if you really want me to help in this ministry, pick up that lamp post and move it 10' to the right. Well, nothing happened, I guess God just wants me to sit here and watch television instead of serve."

There are some circumstantial events that you can legitimately ask for as confirming signs, fleeces if you will. For example, financial provision is always one of the things I ask for as an indicator for what God wants. If we are going to do a project in the church, then I believe in the rule that God provides for what He requires. It is no problem for God to give \$10,000 or \$10,000,000. God provides for what He requires.

So I always ask for the fleece of financial provision as a test of God's will. You can write that one down. If you feel that you are called to be in some sort of mission work and yet there is no financial provision, then I would take that as God's indicator to you to wait, if not permanently shelve the plans. And I never think it is a good idea for someone to go into debt or to start charging things up on their credit card because God is somehow testing your faith. A good fleece is financial provision.

Another good fleece is certainly opportunity. Well, God, if you really want this kind of witness at my school, then you will grant us the provision of a room and the permissions signed. And if you don't get those permissions, then, no, it is not God's will at that moment.

Occasionally, you may feel specially led when you are at a crossroads to ask for some kind of extraordinary confirmation. I was at a crossroads. I couldn't keep doing full-time demanding work at the university and nearly full-time ministry for the church. I needed to know which way to go. And so the fleece that I laid before the Lord was to somehow indicate to me however God wanted to what His will was before I called my wife on Wednesday evening. It was Sunday and I was at the park. I said to God simply, "Speak to my heart before Wednesday night. Do something that I know is you and I will gladly leave my job at OSU." I had a willing heart. My desires were already lined up. I had already had indications regarding my spiritual gifts. There was opportunity for me to minister, but I needed to know what the next step was. Because I was also experiencing blessing and fruitfulness at my job. People were coming to Christ. I was doing deliverances in my faculty office at OSU and that hadn't been done for a while. People had gotten demonized there, but no one had been delivered to my knowledge.

So I set the time limit of me calling my wife, Marlene, by Wednesday evening. I was going to call her at 11:00. Monday nothing happened. Tuesday nothing happened. Wednesday I was sitting at a meeting like this, only with a couple of thousand people. John Wimber got up to speak and he said, "I was going to speak about healing, but tonight I want to talk about the pearl of great price." He said, "Some of you tonight are wondering if God is calling you into full-time ministry. You will know it is the Lord when it is the last hour. When there is no more time, then you will know it is God."

I was just gripping the armrest of the chair. I said, "God, could this possibly be you? Is this you?" Through the course of the talk, John said, "You are going to get to this

point in your job where everything is going really well and then God is going to say, 'Now it is time to leave' as He opens another door." He described his own life and there were seven specific things that John shared that were really confirming signs to me of the Lord speaking.

The next day someone had a prophetic word. They walked by me and put their hand on my chest and said, "The Lord is calling you to be a pastor." Again, remember that I was already praying in this direction. So these words were coming to me by way of highlighting saying, "This is me, Rich. These are not just your thoughts."

Then, the topper was Danny Meyer, the associate pastor here, had a dream on Thursday night. It was a dream involving me. He got up the next morning and said, "Rich, I had a prophetic dream about you last night."

I said, "What was that?"

He said, "Well, in the dream you were a beautician and you were fixing this woman's hair."

So I, of course, accepted that and thanked him for his prophetic insight. I really didn't. I just mocked him. I said, "O, yeah, Dan, that's prophetic. God is not calling me to pastor or preach and he doesn't want me to stay in law. He wants me to go to cosmetology school."

Danny got real intense and he said, "No, no, you are going to see. This is the Lord. This is the Lord."

I said, "Yeah, right."

Well, Friday evening we were at a meeting. There were about 700 people at this meeting. The worship ends and this woman gets up to prophecy. I am standing at the back and she delivers a prophetic word. The prophetic word was simply that God was looking for men who would prepare the hair of the bride of Christ and get the bride ready for her wedding day. She went into great detail about how these men would comb the bride's hair and put combs in it and whatever you put in women's hair. She went through this whole elaborate description of preparing the hair of the bride of Christ.

Having had that word from Danny that morning and hearing that, I bent over in the back and began to weep. I said, "O God, I can't believe that you would speak to me this personally about my calling in life." You must understand that this whole image of preparing the hair of the bride is so contrary to what I would think of in terms of what I would think of from my own flesh regarding leadership. I would probably have come up with an image of taking that hill for Christ. Leading a group of special forces commandos under some barbed wire. I would probably have picked an image that involved maiming or killing, but preparing the hair of the bride – it was so feminine and romantic. So like the Lord to shock us.

Well, I got back to Columbus and my wife, Marlene, began talking with me about all the money we would lose. I was about to be tenured at OSU. When you are a tenured state university professor that is better than being a federal judge. You would have to kill a student and then they would probably say something like, "Well, you get fourteen appeals and you really shouldn't kill students. After all they pay a lot of the bills around here." So I had a secure job for life lined up and I was making great money. The church

at the time was small and had no history of support for pastors at all. We had never had a senior pastor.

She was talking with me about the money and I began to doubt whether I had really heard from God which tells you that it really doesn't matter what kind of signs you get, you have to open your heart in faith to what God is saying. Because almost anything that God does is not so unmistakable that it couldn't be read another way. Have you noticed that about God's activity in healing? You pray for someone and they get well. There is joy at the moment. But then a little later you begin to wonder, "Well, I wonder if he was really that sick."

"I wonder if he got better?"

"I wonder if she was just not persuaded by the tone of our voices?"

So I began thinking about the money and I began to waiver. Marlene told me, "I haven't heard from God. You are going to change our lives and I haven't heard from God." I believe on any kind of major decision, if you are married, there needs to be complete unity between a husband and a wife. One of the confirming signs is what does your spouse say?

But the clincher was going to a meeting with our leadership team. We were praying. I was just saying to the Lord, "Lord, if that really was you back in England, will you speak to me one more time?"

And a guy who normally does not prophesy broke out with a prophetic word in which he said, "I have spoken to you once, yet twice, says the Lord. If you won't listen to me, I will not speak to you another time." And then he just shrugged his shoulders.

I started to laugh. I said, "Well, that word was for me."

I went back home and shared the word that happened at the leadership team meeting and Marlene got so convicted. I guess that word just cut her to the heart and maybe challenged any kind of reservations or faithlessness that was in her heart. She is really small and she looked up into my face and said, "Well, if we don't do this tonight, Richie, let's just go out and get hit by a train."

I said, "I don't want to get hit by a train." But that conversation yielded this principle and I want to go through some of the principles from this extended story.

First of all, I was at a crossroads. I needed to make a decision. I couldn't keep going like I was. Frequently people are placing demands on God for indicators or for signs that are premature. There is no crossroads. There is no urgency. You don't need to know what is going to happen next year right now. But you may need to have an indication if you get an acceptance from three different colleges and they are all equally weighted in terms of the field that you are really competent in and your desires. And they would all be equally good spiritually. They all have strong fellowships. You have gone down the objective indicators and now you need to hear God. Often we are putting demands on the Lord when there is no crossroads. There is no decision to make.

And then I was already in process. I was already being spoken to by God regarding my gifts and those things were being confirmed by the body. There was opportunity to serve that was consistent with my desires. So the prophetic came not out of left field, but by way of confirmation.

And when Marlene said, “Let’s go out and get hit by a train tonight if we don’t do this” I got the third indicator that this is God’s will when you receive it as an issue of simple obedience. You see, so long as you can continue to weigh things and all of your options are open, you could say that you haven’t heard from God yet. But when that kind of liberty is taken away, when God does speak clearly to you and He has spoken to you two or three times about a matter, then you know the call has ripened.

I will hasten to add here that it is not at all necessary that you get some kind of extraordinary guidance like I got in order to make a move forward. But I do believe that on major moves, major moves – you are going to move across country, if you are going to give yourself to world missions for anything other than a short period, something less than a year, the opportunity is there and you have a desire to go, go. But if you are thinking about 3-5 years or a lifetime, or you are thinking about getting married, you don’t necessarily need a prophetic word on that, but you do need an inner assurance that this choice would be pleasing to God, that the two of you would be able to serve the kingdom of God well together, that you are compatible, and so on.

OK, that was prophecy. Now let’s talk about counsel. There is a recurring admonition in the book of Proverbs regarding the importance of seeking counsel. Proverbs 14 says, “Where there is no guidance, people fall. But in the abundance of counselors there is safety.” Proverbs 12:15 says, “The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice.” Proverbs 15:22 says, “Without counsel plans go wrong, but with many advisors they succeed.” Proverbs 19:20 says, “Listen to advice and accept instruction that you may gain wisdom for the future.” Proverbs 24:6 says, “By wise guidance you can wage your war and in the abundance of counselors there is victory.”

There are so many proverbs on getting counsel that we need to see that counsel is one of God’s prime ways of guiding us. Now, there is an aberrant teaching in the church. Some people teach a chain of command type perspective on counsel. If a parent tells a child, no matter how old the child is, what they ought to do the child needs to obey. If a church pastor or someone in leadership tells a church member what to do, they need to obey. I believe we are to honor leaders and honor parents and weigh what they say, but particularly if you are in your late teens or 20’s, and certainly as a member of a church, you are not required to obey the counsel of a leader no matter who that leader is and how smart they are. Counsel is like prophecy. It ought to come by way of confirmation. You are responsible for your life and no one else is responsible. You are responsible to stand before God.

Now, having said that if three, or four, or five people who have no interest in your decision, who don’t stand to gain one way or the other by the decision you make and who are known for spiritual wisdom, who know God well and who know you well, three, four, or five people all give you the same kind of counsel, you would be foolish not to weigh that very seriously. I would say that the burden of proof is on you to show why you are going to disregard their counsel. I think of this particularly regarding marital decisions. When a young couple sits down in my office in premarital counseling and they are gushing about how much they love each other and how there has never been a love like theirs. The angels in heaven are now singing and rejoicing over their match.

Which may be, I have no idea. But one of the first questions I ask that couple to bring them down to earth and tether their hot air balloon is “what are other people saying about your relationship?”

What are significant members in your community saying? Remember plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisors they succeed. Is there anyone who is significant in your community, family member, close friend, pastor, kinship leader, women’s group leader – anyone significant saying that you ought not to get married. If I hear back a statement like, “Well, a number of people are upset that I marrying Sam. They think he is not right for me, but honestly no one sees in him what I see. They don’t see his sweet side the way I do. They don’t see that underneath his violent outbursts is really a kind heart. And underneath his seemingly lazy, absolutely ambitionless, directionless, lostness is really a puppy that just wants to love.”

I would say, “Well, why don’t other people see what you see? Could it be as Proverbs 6:20 says, ‘Do you see a man who is wise in his own eyes, there is more hope for a fool than for him?’” If no one else sees what you see in this other person, then you may be just deluding yourself. I would take Proverbs 26:12 and post it on my face, tattoo it on my right hand because it very well may be that the reason why people around you don’t see what you see is because what you see is not there or what you see is such a small part of the picture that this other part of the picture is going to turn out to be disastrous for you.

No one else is responsible for your marriage decision. You are. But as you make that decision, you want to listen to people’s counsel. You want to weigh in spiritual advice. Because that is God’s way of confirming to you the secret inclinations of your heart.

Let me give you liberating thought #5: It is God’s will for you to think and to employ principles of wisdom before you make a major decision.

I don’t care how spiritual somebody sounds, how prophetically gifted they are, if someone is trying to pressure you not to think, not to weigh, not to discern that kind of counsel is unbiblical. Certainly you need to think with a sanctified mind. I talked about that earlier in the talk. Certainly your thoughts need to be soaked with the Bible concerning what your priorities ought to be. And certainly God’s will is not simply a matter of weighing the pros and cons. I have given you a number of other principles. There are confirming principles regarding the prophetic and counsel. There are spiritual principles of hearing God’s voice in your heart as you experience His love and forgiveness. There are principles of looking at your gifts and your desires.

But I must give you this principle at the end of this talk on thinking and using wisdom because at least in the charismatic circles that I have been in, I have heard teachings that called people to get out of their minds and get into the Spirit. People are challenged because they are too analytical, as if that is unspiritual. I heard one prophetic person literally say, “You need to take your mind and blast it into outer space in a rocket ship.”

Well, all that kind of nonsense really goes back to the ancient Greek heresy called “dualism.” Dualists were people who thought that the body was bad and that the soul was good. That your mind was bad and your spirit was good. But the biblical and

Jewish frame of mind is that all that God has created is good and nothing is to be rejected as long as it is received with thanksgiving and presented to God, yielded to God and God's directions. You are to love God not only with your heart and your desires, but with your brain.

So here you are, you are facing a decision. Use your brain. The first thing you would do with your brain is you would submit it and surrender it to God. You present your whole body to God including your brain. And you say to God, "God, I want to have my mind soaked with kingdom principles, what is best for the kingdom? Here are my goals in life, are these kingdom goals or not?"

I remember one guy in college whose goal in life was 1) to serve Jesus Christ; 2) to make a million dollars. #2 goal ate up #1 goal quickly after college and that guy fell away.

What are we to do with our minds? We are to surrender them and surrender our thoughts about life to God. And make sure that they are lined up with God's word. We need to carefully and honestly, with a sober mind, Paul says in Romans 12, weigh our gifts. Are we really effective teachers or leaders or counselors? Sometimes we don't know. We haven't had enough time to really show our stuff. But if you have had plenty of opportunities and there is no stuff there, or there is plenty of stuff, then you need to note that in your mind. If you are making a major decision like marriage, I would go down that rational checklist very hard. Are we compatible? Have we resolved conflicts? Do we have huge amount in common? Do we both put Jesus Christ first? Do I respect this person? Do I like where their life is going? Do I want to tie my future to this other person's future? Are we in agreement about all the major things in life – finances, in-laws, child-raising.

And then when I think of wisdom principles, one of the principles that I always want to underline with people is that a wise person never thinks of themselves as an exception to the rule. So often we make really foolish decisions because while the general rule would agree applies to 99% of the people, the general rule doesn't apply to us. Oh sure, generally, you shouldn't get married when everyone in the world tells you it is a bad deal, at least everyone who is spiritually minded and who isn't just your friend who will cater to your decisions.

Everyone else shouldn't get into debt, but it is OK for me because this is what God said.

It is OK for me to not work or to go to school, I think my future will still be secure because I have this unique revelation from the Lord.

General wisdom principle is that you are probably not an exception to the rules. And if everyone else says that what you are doing is dangerous or foolish, it will lead to disaster, a wise person listens. Think. Submit your mind to Christ.

You don't have to fear missing the will of God. God is so good that He will get through to anyone who inclines their heart to hear. You don't have to revisit decisions over and over again. If they were made in faith with a desire for God, then even if there was some so-called mistake, God can work that out as well and bring blessing out of a difficult situation.

Conclusion.