

**SPECIAL MESSAGES**  
**HOW TO KNOW THE WILL OF GOD**  
**Romans 12:1-2**

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

How to know the will of God? This question is perhaps not exactly what you think it is. Frequently, we want to say to God, “Just tell me what to do. Just tell me what you want from me. Tell me what’s next.” To our high school students: You know that thought, “What do I do when I finish high school? Do I go to college? Where do I go to college? What do I study? What do I major in? What career do I choose? Who should I marry?” Important life decisions. Do I keep this job? Do I quit this job? Do I go to a new job? Do I live here?

A lot of times we want God to tell us what to do, right? So, when I ask the question in this message, which focuses on this topic – How to Know the Will of God – that’s not the type of question we are answering. That question is the question of guidance. How does God guide me? You might ask it this way: How do I hear God? How do I hear God in reference to a specific situation?

That question – “How do I hear God?” – is not a question that God always answers. In fact, frequently God does not answer that question with the kind of clarity that we really desire. He does give guidance. He does promise guidance and he does lead us. But from my own experience, it’s been on very rare occasions that I felt like God clearly spoke about a specific direction.

There are examples of God speaking clearly in scripture. But before you get too eager for God to clearly speak to you on these matters, let me just tell you that many times God gives us that kind of clarity because it’s going to be very difficult.

The Apostle Paul – before he was Paul he was Saul. The Lord appeared to him on the road to Damascus in a bright and shining light. Jesus spoke to him, and he had a tough calling. He was called to suffer. In fact, Ananias was told by the Lord to go over and pray for Saul. It was the first

three days of his conversion -- brand new. Ananias was not convinced that Saul was even saved. He had been out persecuting and killing Christians. And the Lord spoke this to Ananias and to Saul: "I will show him how much he will suffer for me." So you have to ask yourself: Do I really want God to speak to me that clearly? God tells you: "Marry her." Hmmmm, right? We want that kind of clarity. He gives it to us when we need it.

But, there is a question that God always answers and that is: What is his will for your life? It's a more general question, and he answers it in this passage. He tells us the answer to that question. In fact, we are going to break it down, because part of the beauty of this passage is the overview it gives us for this topic. We are going to answer three questions:

- I. What is God's will for your life? He plainly states it here.
- II. How do you get there? How do you do it? How do you live it out?
- III. Why you really want this.

It's important to know all three, because if you stop at #1, it will be an unpleasant experience, a difficult experience, a discouraging experience. We need to know how, and why you really want this. If I could whet your appetite with this last question before we jump more directly into the passage, let me say this: There is a promise here. There is a reference to God doing something in your life as you commit to living his will and doing the "how" in the way that God wants you to do it.

The "why" is fantastic in that God will so transform you, and so become a part of your life, and take over and do wonderful things that you will have, then, the guidance that you desire. Maybe not in terms of this revelatory voice of God always speaking to you, but you will live a life of making godly decisions according to a renewed and transformed mind, by the grace of God, where you will live out a beautiful, spectacular, amazing life as a living demonstration of the will of God. So let's jump in and start with #1.

- I. What is God's will for your life?

In short, the answer to this question is: God's will for your life is for you to give yourself completely to him, to give yourself wholly to him. Paul writes: "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." Present your bodies to God as a living sacrifice. This is an amazing picture

of the Christian climbing up on the altar and saying, “God, I’m yours. My entire life belongs to you.” This is God’s will for your life.

Jesus said something similar in Luke 9:23: “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” -- a daily dying to self and living for God. This is described in our text today as “spiritual worship.” This is your spiritual worship. We present ourselves. We present, literally, our bodies to God, and it is described as an act of worship.

These two words that are translated “spiritual worship” are very difficult for us to translate from the Greek New Testament into English. There have been a lot of attempts made. The word that’s translated “spiritual” means rational or reasonable. It’s really referring to the logical response to the mercies of God. The only reasonable reaction for the Christian to God’s grace is to give himself or herself to God completely. Then the word translated “worship” means service or worship. The idea is spiritual worship or thoughtful service. Perhaps a better translation is even “true worship.”

God desires for you, if you are a follower of Jesus Christ, to live a life abandoned to God – a life of true and authentic worship, where you give not just gifts to God, but you give yourself to God. God wants not just your possessions or certain aspects of your life. He certainly wants that, but he is after the giver. It involves all of you. You see it in the terms that are used here. We present our bodies, but then that’s spiritual, rational, reasonable worship. Body and soul, body and mind, we give them the Lord.

Again, going back to the words of Jesus, he told us this was the first and great commandment in Matthew 22:37-38. “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment.” Three words describe the sacrifice you offer to God. It’s a living sacrifice. You are giving yourself to the Lord, a holy sacrifice, an acceptable or pleasing sacrifice.

God desires for you, my friend, to know him personally, and out of that knowledge, that relationship with God, for you to live a life of worship to him – a life where you give yourself to the Lord in worship. It’s an invitation to fulfill your God-given purpose. It’s an invitation for you to say, “I don’t want to negotiate with God. I want to surrender to God and say yes to him in every area of my life.” That’s the “what.” Now, if we stop there, this would not be a very good message. It would be true in one sense, but you have to know how to do this. You have to understand where the power comes from to live a life of worship to the Lord. So, we move on to #2, which is the “how.”

II. How?

It's a very important part of this passage. I'm going to give you the answer to "how" in two parts.

- A. The first part is spiritual renewal. "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind." This is a reference to an ongoing process where your mind is transformed, daily renewed, in and by the Spirit of God, by the Word of God, by the truth of God. Again, it's an ongoing process.

This reminds us of a passage we looked at recently: Ephesians 4, verse 22 and following, where Paul wrote: "...to put off your old self, which belongs to your former manner of life and is corrupt through deceitful desires, and to be renewed in the spirit of your minds, and to put on the new self, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness."

You remember, maybe, if you heard that message, that Paul really gave us three aspects to learning Christ, to growing in Christ. We put off the old. We put on the new. And those two aspects are in one sense one-time commitments, a one-time resolution, where we give ourselves to God and say, "The old person is no more. I no longer live for myself, but now I am a new person in Christ, living for Christ."

In between, there is the renewing of your mind, which is an ongoing process, a continual pathway of growth. The one-time put off and put on are commitments. We use the analogy of marriage, whereas marriage is this one moment of commitment that you make to one another, but every day, day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year, you get up and you have to live out that commitment. You have to live a life that reflects and embodies that resolve.

But our minds are constantly being renewed, where we are putting off the old and putting on the new. In the language of today's text, we are not conformed to the image of this world. Our lives, our desires, our dreams, our practices, our thinking, our words are not shaped by this world, but we are constantly being renewed and being transformed. The word is the Greek word from which we get our English word "metamorphosis." We have now a completely new identity in Jesus Christ, and we are being transformed. Spiritual renewal is part one.

- B. Part two -- all the points are important, but I think this is the hinge on which the door swings. It is that we are renewed by receiving and responding to the mercies of God.

He begins these two verses with these words: "I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God." Here is what Paul is doing. Chapters 1 through 11 of the book of Romans are the doctrinal section. They are teaching something very, very important about the world and us and God, specifically God's grace and God's mercy. Paul uses this little descriptive phrase to describe everything he has done before: "the mercies of God."

He is telling us that what follows in chapters 12 through 16, through the rest of the book of Romans, is how to live the Christian life -- how to love other people, how to use your gift to honor the Lord, how to love even your enemies, how to be kind to one another, how to relate to the government, and how to take care of one another in family relationships. All of these things that he'll unpack in these last four chapters -- he is telling us that you can't do that unless you receive, respond, receive, respond to chapters 1-11, "the mercy of God."

You cannot give yourself wholly to God until God's renewing, life-giving mercy sweeps in and transforms your life. So he begins Romans Chapter 1, his theme in verse 16. He says, "I am not ashamed of the good news of Jesus Christ because it is the power of God unto salvation." He begins systematically for 11 chapters to teach us that our relationship with God is broken. It is seriously broken and we are under the judgment of God. Everything that's wrong in the world and all of the dysfunction of our lives -- though we are beautifully and wonderfully made and there's so much to rejoice about -- the heartache of all that's wrong with the world is summed up in one word, and that word is "sin."

Yesterday I went to the funeral of a 3-year-old girl. Her father pastors Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church. Rob Pacienza is a friend. Rob and Jen are friends here in the city. They are pastoring in this church that has been a historic church here in our city. Last Saturday night they went to check on their little 3-year-old girl and she was unresponsive. They rushed her to the hospital...and she is gone from this world.

The bible tells us the ultimate reason for tragedy is that our relationship with God is broken. Sin has entered the world. It has brought death. It has brought tragedy. It has brought corruption and decay of every form and every kind. If we don't understand this, then we have no way to understand the tragic events that take place in the human life.

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After the service I was visiting with some of the other pastors there. I took a few minutes and was talking to the pastor of Calvary Chapel, Doug Sauder and his wife Suzanne. I didn't know this previous to this event, but they lost a child at 1 year of age. They were conveying to me how this service, of course, brought up a lot of emotion from an event that happened many, many years ago for them.

This is what they told me. They said, "You know, sometimes people say the dumbest things in the middle of great tragedy. They offer explanations and they say things." But Pastor Doug told me the exact place where something else happened. He was standing in a church and this great big man (he said he can picture him today: red hair, red beard) came up and just put his hand on his shoulder. And he told me that he began to weep as he was comforted, just by a touch.

Sin is the explanation for all that's wrong in the world, all that's broken. Now, here's what's amazing. God says, "Listen, that's judgment for a rejection of God. But I'm going to redeem my creation. I'm going to restore it. I'm going to save." So he sends his Son, and we receive forgiveness of sin and the gift of salvation by faith as a gift. He takes 11 chapters to explain this glorious truth. He calls it the mercies of God.

Christian: Here is the challenge for you. If I just go hard after describing to you what it looks like for you to give yourself wholly to God, it could in the end be very, very frustrating for you, because that only happens as your mind is renewed by the mercies of God. As you understand, "I have a new identity, and it's just God's gift! I didn't earn it. I don't deserve it. In fact, my old identity was headed to a very, very bad place. My old identity apart from Christ was capable of some very, very bad things. The truth of the matter is, if you've seen a few bad things in my life, you have no idea how really bad it was on the inside!"

And yet, God in his mercy, in that moment of darkness and decay and corruption said, "I love you. I love you so much I'm going to send my sinless, perfect Son to give his life for you, to free you of that corruption, to free you of that darkness, to free you of the bondage and enslavement which holds you in this moment!"

"Therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, I appeal to you." There is a renewal. The "how" is: I'm constantly being renewed. I may have struggled with this sin for 50 years, but it does not define me. The mercy of God is greater than that. I may have been sinned against in a way that so deeply

violated me, something so precious may have been taken from me, but it doesn't define me and God's grace is greater than the violation that was enacted against me. So there is a freedom in God.

But here is the rub for you and me. It's a process of renewal. It's a process of the washing of our minds. It's a process of living out the new life, the regeneration that is ours in Christ Jesus. Let me just give the "how" to you in a statement very clearly: I am gradually transformed and spiritually renewed as I receive and respond to the mercies of God.

As this happens, and you and I become free to celebrate God's mercy, you begin to take your past failure -- you quit justifying it, and it becomes a part of your story, where you appropriately are able to say, "You know, this is where I was when Christ found me, and look at what he is doing now in my life. So I don't boast in what I did. I don't boast about the mistakes I made. But look at how Christ has taken that and cleansed me, and used even that for good in my life." Transformed by the mercies of God, which leads us to our last point.

III. Why you really want this.

He gives us this really unique explanation: "that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." "That by testing you may discern." This seems odd, because in one sense we know the will of God. We know God is telling us, "Hey, give yourself to God." But life gets complicated, doesn't it? It gets really strange. Relationships are broken. We try. We fail. There are so many times where we genuinely just don't know how to get through it. Then we begin to anticipate, "If I say this, then this person will say that. And if I do this, this person will do that, and that could make it worse. God, how do I do this? How do I navigate through all this?" God loves to take those situations and redeem and restore. He loves to do that.

I think this morning of the relationship that I had with my father-in-law before he went to be with the Lord. My relationship with my father-in-law was very unique. The day I asked him for Beth's hand in marriage, he knew I was coming to the house for that purpose. I was a nervous wreck. Here I was -- 26 years old, and I was just scared to death. So he thought it would be funny to do this: I knocked on the door and came in, and he had a shotgun on his lap. I just couldn't enjoy the moment. I couldn't. You would think that that would let all the pressure out of the room, but I just wasn't sure if he was being for real.

So we went to play golf together. My father-in-law was not a very good golfer and there was this miraculous moment where he birdied the #1 handicap hole. It was a miracle. I thought, "This is my

moment.” And you know what? It didn’t go great. He expressed some doubts. He was kind to me. He was respectful. Beth and I did get married, but there were some rocky days there in the engagement. When I say “rocky,” I mean, he was very honest about his reservations.

Now, this is what’s amazing. You know my testimony. Beth and I got married. There was a time of difficulty. We struggled, and if you know our testimony, you know we almost didn’t make it. God did a miracle -- just a miracle of God’s grace. Today, my wife loves me. She loves me so much it’s wonderful. Okay. On and on and on. It really is a part of our story, where we say, “This is where we were without Christ.” God took that and now he is using us to encourage other couples and strengthen other couples, because we have known God’s mercy in this regard.

I am telling you this because I want you to see this. My sweet in-laws loved their daughter so much. They lived through those four years, and when we emerged out of it, they didn’t, initially. I was the guy that made life miserable for their daughter. That wasn’t the whole story, but certainly you could see where that was their perspective.

And there came a time where – imagine this – in the middle of it all, we were trying to lead him to Jesus. “Excuse me, I’m the jerk that made your daughter miserable. Come to Jesus, who I preach about.” Right? Six months before my father-in-law died of a fatal disease he accepted Jesus Christ as his Savior and shared with me the testimony that I was a dear friend to him.

If you say, “Brian, how did you get from point A to point B? It was God’s grace, wasn’t it, dear? It was just God’s grace. There were moments in there where Beth and I both, as God had healed our relationship, we were trying to say, “Do we do this? Do we do this?” because we were living out a life of faith, trying to present ourselves to the Lord. And some of the decisions we were making seemed so strange to our family. You are adopting a 10 and 12-year-old from Africa? What are you thinking? You are homeschooling your kids? Are either one of you smart enough to do that?

That was just the way we were living out our faith. There is no prescription there for you. That’s not the point of that. What I want you to see is that this verse tells you that when you go to translate what it looks like to live out a life wholly devoted to the Lord, you are not always going to find that obvious. You are going to have to test it. You are going to have to see God approve it in your life.

As you do it, and as the Spirit of God is healing you of all of that bad, old thinking, of condemnation, and you are discovering your new identity in Christ and your freedom from sin, your freedom from



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guilt, your freedom from shame -- so much freedom that you can stand in front of people and talk about what a mess you were at one time, and still are in some senses, but God is renewing you.

There is such a freedom in that! Such liberty in Christ! You just begin to know God's will. You are not hearing a voice, but many of you are at a point in your life where you go out of here and certain things are presented to you and you say, "Nope. Not God, not God, not God, God."

Here's the thing. There will be people in your life who will come along and say, "God, God, God," and you are in your mind saying, "No, that is not God." If I want to, I can always go out and find some well-meaning person that I shape the facts for in just in a certain way, so that I'll get the answer I want. Right?

But inside, God is offering you an existence, a call to a beautiful life, a life where you are living out, you are demonstrating the will of God, the grace of God, the mercy of God, the healing of God to others, because he is renewing your mind in terms of a whole new identity of who you are in Christ. Isn't that great news?

So, here's what you do. Here's how we end. You give yourself to that call. Don't give God part of your life. Give God all of your life, understanding that as you do that, you will at times stumble and imperfectly move through it. God wants to renew you. He wants to renew your mind, not just to strengthen you to do better, but for you to know the mercy of God, which now defines you.

There is a process. We talk about Gather, Connect, Serve, Grow. We talk about being a part of the people of God and gathering together, connecting in relationship, serving others, and spending time, growing in our own walk with the Lord -- committing to that process of renewal, stepping out to do, testing and approving the will of God as you go -- all of it defined by the mercy of God. Let's bow our heads, please.