

How to Make Wise Ethical Decisions

Christians often wonder, “How can I find out God’s will for me?” – about a job, about marriage, or about many smaller decisions in everyday life. This session will discuss how to consider information from the Bible, from the situation, and from personal advice, changed circumstances, a subjective sense of what to do, and following guidance from the Holy Spirit. All of this will be viewed from a perspective that God clearly wants us to know his will in each circumstance, and that there will always be at least one right choice that he wants us to make.

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Introduction: “How can I know God’s will?”

- Examples: For my life, college major, career, marriage partner, particular job opportunity, what church to go to, or whether to volunteer for some church or charitable activity (such as ____),
- Or it could be that you want God’s wisdom regarding simpler, everyday things (like what to do this afternoon or this evening, what phone calls to make, what emails to answer, etc.)

A. Step one: settle in your mind that God always has a right solution

1. God’s oversight of your circumstances:

No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape (Gk. *ekbasis*, “way out, esp. way out of some difficulty”), that you may be able to endure it. (1Co 10:13)

2. Jesus’ help and example:

For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. (Heb 4:15)

3. Therefore pray:

do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (Phi 4:6)

4. This should remove a huge amount of stress from the situation

B. Step two: The overall perspective: (why knowing God’s will is not a simple question)

1. You as a whole person are relating to God as a person, seeking to know what is pleasing to him

2. Very broadly, you are seeking to apply everything you know about God and his Word to everything you know about yourself and your situation.
 - a. This is why it is not a simple task!
 - b. Requires wisdom, discernment – a frequent quality in New Testament
And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment (Gk. *aesthēsis*, “discernment, insight, capacity to understand”),¹⁰ so that you may approve what is excellent (Gk. *ta diapheronta*, “the things that differ and are worth more, are superior to”), and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, (Phi 1:9-10)
→ most of our decisions as Christians are between various good choices, not between morally right and morally wrong actions
and try to discern (Gk. *dokimazō*, “to learn about and approve by testing”) what is pleasing to the Lord. (Eph 5:10)
And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,¹⁰ so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. (Col 1:9-10)
 - c. We get better at making such decisions by years of practice
But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment (plural of Gk. *aisthētērion*, capacity of discernment, ability to make moral decisions) trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil. (Heb 5:14)
 - d. Sometimes we have to – and we can—make such decisions instantly, instinctively
But one day, when he [Joseph] went into the house to do his work and none of the men of the house was there in the house,¹² she [Potiphar’s wife] caught him by his garment, saying, "Lie with me." But he left his garment in her hand and fled and got out of the house (Gen 39:11)
Example of a wrong decision made instantly: 2 Sam 6:6-7
 - e. But if we have time to decide something, it’s good to consider various factors (see below)

C. Factors to consider in making an ethical decision

1. All that you know about the Bible
Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path. (Psa 119:105)
How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word.¹⁰ With my whole heart I seek you; let me not wander from your commandments!¹¹ I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you. (Psa 119:9-11)
All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, (2Ti 3:16)
--> regular reading and memory, plus searching on specific topics
2. All that you know about yourself and the situation
 - a. Yourself: you are not the same as anybody else
For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned.⁴ For as in one body we have many members,

and the members do not all have the same function,⁵ so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. (Rom 12:3)

- b. The situation: you might have to gather more information
For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? (Luk 14:28; see vss. 31-32 on going to war)
 3. You can “know” things in #1 and #2 above through various means
 - a. Through your **intellect**, that is, your knowledge of Scripture, self, situation
 - These are things you can put in sentences and give facts and reasons to support.
 - **Never** allow the other factors below to lead you to disobey the clear commands of Scripture!
 - God never wants us to disobey what he has already commanded us.
 - b. Through **advice** from other people
Where there is no guidance, a people falls, but in an abundance of counselors there is safety. (Pro 11:14)
I myself am satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct (Gk. *noutheteō*, “counsel about a course of action”) one another. (Rom 15:14)
 - c. Through changes in circumstances – but this requires wise discernment of God’s purposes, prayer
But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost,⁹ for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries (1Co 16:8-9; but also Matt. 10:14; 1 Cor. 18:6 and Paul’s pattern of leaving synagogues when they continued to oppose him)
But then note a different response in Troas: When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, even though a door was opened for me in the Lord,¹³ my spirit was not at rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I took leave of them and went on to Macedonia. (2Co 2:12)
 - d. Through various **subjective perceptions** of what is wise, right, pleasing to God
 - (1) Conscience: I am speaking the truth in Christ--I am not lying; my conscience bears me witness in the Holy Spirit-- (Rom 9:1)
Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honorably in all things. (Heb 13:18)
 - (2) Heart: Beloved, if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God; (1Jo 3:21)
Keep your heart with all vigilance, for from it flow the springs of life. (Pro 4:23)
Sometimes our “heart” can refer to our specific plans or desires for something:
And Nathan said to the king, "Go, do all that is in your heart, for the LORD is with you." (2Sa 7:3)
Delight yourself in the LORD, and he will give you the desires of your heart. (Psa 37:4)
 - for Christians walking in obedience to the Lord and praying, a person’s own heart desires should be a large factor in discerning God’s will
- A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. (1Co 7:39)
The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires (Gk. *oregeō*, “to seek to accomplish, aspire, strive for”) to the office of overseer, he desires (*epithumeō*, “to have a strong desire, long for”) a noble task. (1Ti 3:1)

(3) Your human spirit:

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord,⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, (Luk 1:46)

When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, even though a door was opened for me in the Lord,¹³ my spirit was not at rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I took leave of them and went on to Macedonia. (2Co 2:12-13; cf. Mark 2:8; John 13:21; Acts 17:16; 1 Cor 12:10)

(4) Through guidance from the Holy Spirit

For all who are led (Gk. *agontai*, "who are being led over time, regularly") by the Spirit of God are sons of God. (Rom 8:14; also Gal. 5:16, 18, 25; Acts 13:2; 15:28; 16:6-7)

-- Leading by the Holy Spirit can also come through other people when God brings something to their mind about you, but be cautious about this and don't act on this alone – see discussions elsewhere on gift of prophecy (1Thess. 5:19-21)

(5) All of the above can register in instinctive sense of what is the right thing to do (often the result of our minds somehow processing thousands of different bits of relevant information simultaneously and instantly)

(your "gut feeling" about something) (It's good not to "overthink" many decisions.)

(6) Can these subjective perceptions (what the modern world calls "feelings" or "emotions") mislead you?

Yes! But so can sermons, and advice, and books, and friends! This does not mean we should reject all of these things.

→ We should still pay attention to these factors, because God relates to us as whole persons, not just as intellects. But we should never follow subjective impressions to disobey the clear teachings of Scripture!

D. Finally: Don't make this too complicated. I don't think God wants this to be impossible for us to do regularly.

If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.⁶ But let him ask in faith [that God has a right solution and wants you to know it!], with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. (Jam 1:5)