

Knowing God's Will

Acts 1:15-17, 21-26

Gambling can be a fatal disease. For most people it is certainly a losing proposition. We often hear about people who have gone to Las Vegas or Atlantic City and have won huge jackpots. What we don't hear about is that most people who go to casinos sometimes lose just a little bit, but sometimes lose their life savings.

According to an online report in the *Motley Fool*, gamblers in just 4 Las Vegas casinos lost \$54,939 ... per day. Apparently the only way to double your money in Las Vegas is to fold it and put it in your pocket.

Today you don't even have to go to Las Vegas to gamble. You can buy a lottery ticket in any convenience store for a chance to win it big. Some view the lottery as a tax on the poor because so many people look at the lottery as their only hope of coming out of life ahead. What it does, of course, is put them deeper in a hole.

An article in *Time* magazine years ago shared the story about a 60 year old man waiting in line outside a shop in Greenwich, Connecticut to buy lottery tickets. The temperature was well above 95 degrees when he keeled over onto the sidewalk. When the ambulance came he was still conscious but refused to get out of line until he first bought his \$15 worth of tickets.

In the line with him was a 25-year-old father of three, who drove two hours from Brooklyn to spend \$175 of bunched up 5's and 10's on Powerball tickets. When asked by the Times reporter if he could he afford it, he replied, "No comment."

Still more disturbing was the 28-year-old waiter in line taking all the money he had saved for college and buying Powerball tickets.¹

The commercials tell us about the millions of dollars the lottery provides to education; but nothing is said about the savings accounts that are drained or the lives that are ruined.

Truth is, gambling has always been with us. In our lesson this morning, in the book of Acts, the disciples were faced with a choice between two men, one of whom would replace the Judas. We read that the disciples "cast lots" to choose his successor.

Casting lots seems like a mild form of gambling, and a strange way for the disciples to choose a successor to carry on the work of Judas. It seems strange that the disciples would seek the will of God by casting lots.

But, then, how do you know the will of God? This is one of the most vexing questions in our faith. Many of us want to know God's will for our lives so that we can make appropriate choices. A young man falls in love. "Is this the right person for me?" he asks himself. "Is it God's will for me to marry?" Perhaps that is a question that isn't asked much anymore.

Talk about a gamble. A young couple meets at a vulnerable time in their lives when hormones are bubbling and the urge to merge is stronger than the will to be still, and their judgment has not quite matured, to make a decision about the person they're going to spend the rest of their lives with. Wouldn't it be great if people would invite God to have a say in the matter?

¹ "The Lucky Thirteen" Aug. 10, 1998, p. 64.

It's difficult to know the will of God. It humbles us all. Many people want to do God's will, so they "put out a fleece." We read about putting out a "fleece" in the book of Judges where Gideon is told by God to do something, and after a while Gideon starts wondering if he heard God correctly, so he "tests" God by putting out a fleece.

Gideon says to God, "If you will save Israel by my hand... I will place a wool fleece on the threshing floor. If there is dew only on the fleece and all the ground is dry, then I will know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you said."

And that's what happened. Gideon rose early the next day; squeezed the fleece, and wrung out a bowlful of water. Meanwhile the ground around was dry. Not yet convinced, Gideon says to God, "Don't be angry with me, and it's not that I didn't see this with my own eyes, but let me try this again. This time make the fleece dry and the ground around it covered with dew." Which is just what happened. (6:37-40).

Gideon was "putting out a fleece", asking God to give him a sign so he could know God's will. I wish knowing the will of God was that easy. But it's not. It's very difficult to know God's will in specific circumstances.

In our lesson the disciples cast lots because they were in a situation where they could not lose. Both candidates fit the requirements for being a disciple. The disciples just needed to make a decision. And so they made their decision by casting lots. Either choice would have worked out fine because God was going to use whomever they chose to accomplish His purposes.

In the end it didn't matter if it was Matthias or Barsabbas. Because God was involved, it would work out. Still the question remains: How do you know the will of God? Let me suggest some better ways than casting lots.

First of all, **be a person of prayer and a student of scriptures.** In other words, spend time daily with God. Don't wait until a moment of crisis or when you are facing a difficult decision. Pray daily to "have the same mind in you which was in Christ Jesus" as Paul writes in Philippians. It's a simple starting point, but it will put you on solid ground.

According to a Barna study, only 13% of adults turn to the Bible for help in making moral decisions, 14% of people rely on their parents' advice when making a decision, and 25%, (that's 1 out of every 4 people), simply let their "feelings" be their moral guide in a sticky situation.²

Feelings are a poor guide for discerning the will of God, yet people are constantly being led to make bad decisions based on their feelings. We should pray and study in order to discover the mind of Christ and in this way we are more apt to make better decisions in every situation, not just when you're confronting an especially challenging choice.

Secondly, **when making a difficult decision, consult someone who's judgment you trust.** Sometimes we have too much invested in a decision personally to see clearly what God's will may be, and we need someone else's viewpoint who is not as emotionally involved. And when that advice is given, we need to be strong enough to listen, even if it's advice we don't want to hear.

² "Poll Finds Church Scene 'Back to Normal' After Attack" by Jon Walker, *Pulpit Helps*, Feb. 2002, p. 9

A young man bought a car that turned out to be a lemon, and a friend who was very knowledgeable about cars asked, "Why didn't you ask me for advice?" The young man said, "I was afraid you'd tell me not to buy it."

That happens. The last thing some of us want to do is to ask for advice, particularly when our hearts are set on a certain course. But that's the very reason we need the advice of others.

After you've done all that, pray that God will help you make the best decision possible, then make your decision. Don't look for a sign. Don't consult that day's astrological chart. Don't consult a piece of paper in a fortune cookie. Don't put out a fleece. Be in prayer, read the scripture, ask the advice of another, make your decision. And then take one more step – which is the most important step of all.

Trust God to help you turn that decision into the right decision. When we have to make a decision, the very reason it's difficult is that the future is unknowable. There's only one thing certain that I know about the future and that's that God is in it.

Even if your decision turns out not to be the best, I believe that God will turn it into something good, even if it is only a necessary learning experience.

It's no accident that so many successful people have failed miserably at some venture previously in their lives. They learned things about themselves from that failure that made them successful later.

Listen to what Pastor Leslie Weatherhead wrote about those times in his life when he experienced dark days: "I can only write down this simple testimony. Like all [people], I love and prefer the sunny uplands of experience when health, happiness and success abound but I have learned more about God, life, and myself in the darkness of fear and failure than I have ever learned in the sunshine.

There are such things as the treasure of darkness. The darkness, thank God, passes, but what one learns in the darkness, one possesses forever."

So, pray daily. Know the Scriptures. Consult others whose opinion you respect. Listen to their counsel. Pray over your specific decision, make your decision, and then, most importantly, trust God to help you turn that decision into the right direction.

None of this will help you at a Las Vegas roulette table, except perhaps to keep you away from Las Vegas. But living according to the will of God always puts you on the winning side.