



What the Bible Says about

HOW TO KNOW GOD'S WILL



Wayne Grudem

“Besides its straightforwardness, clarity, and grounding in Scripture, what I like most about this book is its practicality. By following its counsel and being led by the Holy Spirit, Christians will be well equipped to discern and commit to God’s will for their lives!”

Gregg R. Allison, Professor of Christian Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; Pastor, Sojourn Community Church; author, *Sojourners and Strangers*; *Roman Catholic Theology and Practice*; and *Historical Theology*

“In my forty-five years of pastoral ministry, there is one question that I’ve been asked more than any other: *How might I know God’s will?* That is why I’m so happy to recommend Grudem’s short treatment of this topic. His analysis is not only thoroughly biblical, but also incredibly practical and easy to grasp. So whether you are a seasoned believer or a young Christian, were you to ask me that all-too-familiar question, I would send you to this book. I highly recommend it!”

Sam Storms, Senior Pastor, Bridgeway Church, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

“I wholeheartedly recommend Wayne Grudem’s book. These principles have guided my own decisions, and I’m thrilled to know they are in a book I can give to others.”

Jason Fritz, Lead and Founding Pastor, Illuminate Community Church, Scottsdale, Arizona

What the Bible Says about How to Know God's Will

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Wayne Grudem

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INTRODUCTION

What factors should we consider in making decisions?

What does it mean to be “led by the Holy Spirit”?

Christians instinctively want to live in a way that pleases God. In fact, Jesus said, “If you love me, you will keep my commandments” (John 14:15). But sometimes it is unclear what “keeping God’s commandments” implies when facing a specific decision. There are many times when it does not seem as if any specific teaching of Scripture can decide an issue for us.

This book is intended to provide helpful guidelines whenever people wonder, “What is God’s will for me in this specific situation?”

A. DECISIONS CAN BE QUICK OR DRAWN-OUT, AND CAN INVOLVE MAJOR EVENTS OR SMALL DAILY ACTIVITIES

Some decisions must be made instantly. When Joseph was working in Potiphar’s house in Egypt, one day 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. 39:12; notice also his earlier pattern of wise responses in vv. 7–10). Joseph had only an instant to respond, and he made a wise decision and fled.¹

Other decisions take more time. In this book I will explain multiple factors that can and should be considered when we have more time to make a decision and when the decision itself is important enough to consider in greater detail.

Sometimes knowing God’s will involves major decisions, such as what career to aim for, what subject a student should choose as a college major, or whom to marry. Sometimes the question is whether to take a new job or stay in the present job, which church to join, or whether to volunteer for a charitable cause or church activity. Still other situations may involve difficult end-of-life decisions regarding a terminally ill family member. And yet other decisions relate to convictions about public-policy issues, such as abortion, capital punishment, euthanasia, war, marriage laws, or the legalization of marijuana.

1. In another case, Uzzah had an instant to decide and made the wrong decision. God had given a clear commandment that the people “must not touch the holy things, lest they die” (Num. 4:15, referring to the various furnishings for the tabernacle). But the magnitude of God’s holiness behind that prohibition had not penetrated deeply enough into Uzzah’s heart, because when King David and the people of Israel were bringing the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem, Uzzah actually touched the ark: “And when they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, *Uzzah put out his hand to the ark of God and took hold of it*, for the oxen stumbled. And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Uzzah, and God struck him down there because of his error, and he died there beside the ark of God” (2 Sam. 6:6–7). There was also a failure of leadership in this situation, because the ark was wrongly being carried on a cart rather than with poles placed through the rings on the corners of the ark (see Ex. 25:14–15; 2 Sam. 6:3–4).

At other times Christians desire to have God's wisdom regarding simpler, everyday decisions, such as which emails to respond to or delete, which phone calls to make or postpone, or how to schedule various tasks that have to be done on certain days.

For all such questions, whether large or small, the following process should be helpful (even if only parts of this process are used in some situations).

The next two sections will discuss *four dimensions of every action* and *nine sources of information* that should be considered in any moral decision.

B. FOUR DIMENSIONS OF EVERY ACTION

Human actions have at least four dimensions that need to be considered when decisions need to be made:

1. The action itself
2. The person's attitudes about the action
3. The person's motives for doing the action (the reason why the person does something)
4. The results of the action

While the action itself, as soon as it is done, will be visible to you and to others, your attitudes and motives will be mostly invisible, and the results of the action will also be mostly invisible because they have not happened yet.

We can consider these four dimensions to every action in more detail.

1. The Action Itself. The first question to ask is, Is this a morally good action? To decide that, we need to know the commands of Scripture regarding the action.

Some actions are clearly prohibited by Scripture. The Bible tells us not to murder (Ex. 20:13), not to commit adultery (v. 14), not to steal (v. 15), not to bear false witness (v. 16), and so on. Other actions are commanded. Scripture says to “honor your father and your mother” (v. 12). Elsewhere the Bible tells us that we are to “pay . . . taxes to whom taxes are owed” (Rom. 13:7).

But many actions that we have to consider are neither specifically commanded nor specifically prohibited by Scripture, such as whether to accept a particular job offer, which used car to purchase, which church to join, or whom to marry. For such decisions, we need to consider other dimensions of the action in question, and we need to consider all nine sources of information.

2. The Person’s Attitudes about the Action. Because “the LORD looks on the heart” (1 Sam. 16:7), it is not enough for us simply to do morally right actions. God also wants the attitudes of our hearts to be right before him:

Every way of a man is right in his own eyes,
but *the LORD weighs the heart.* (Prov. 21:2)

In some cases, an *action* can be right and the *results* can be morally good, but a person’s *attitudes* might be wrong. For instance, if Julie’s mother tells her that she has to clean

her room before she can go out to play with friends, she might do the right action (clean the room in a hurry) and get the right results (a clean room) but with the wrong attitude (she slams the door and cleans the room in anger and with simmering resentment against her mother).

3. The Person's Motives for Doing the Action. Jesus taught us to beware of doing good actions with wrong motives, such as the desire to be praised by other people:

Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people *in order to be seen by them*, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. (Matt. 6:1–2; cf. 23:5–7)

For example, consider a couple who are talking together about whether they should agree to help with their church's youth ministry one night a week. If they honestly ask themselves why they want to do this, they might find that their motives are very positive ones, such as a desire to minister effectively to young people who come to their church, to be involved in a church activity in which their children participate, to do some kind of ministry together, to meet a need because of a shortage of volunteers at the time, or because of other similar motives. They might simply want to honor God in the way they conduct their lives and to advance his

kingdom, as Jesus taught: “Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you” (Matt. 6:33).

On the other hand, they might find that their motives are not appropriate. They might be thinking about helping in the youth ministry because a neighbor has been putting pressure on them to do so and they are tired of telling him no, even though they do not feel it is the right thing for them to do. Or they might want to become better known and gain recognition from others in the church, which is a simple appeal to their pride. Or they might be seeking an opportunity to observe the youth pastor so they can lodge more criticisms against him with the church leaders! All of these would be wrongful motives.

4. The Results of the Action. Other passages in Scripture encourage us to take thought about the results of our actions. For example, Paul wanted the Christians at Corinth to evaluate what was happening in their worship services to see if various activities actually contributed to building up one another in the Lord:

What then, brothers? When you come together, each one has a hymn, a lesson, a revelation, a tongue, or an interpretation. *Let all things be done for building up.*
(1 Cor. 14:26)

To take another example, Paul was persuaded that the unclean foods in the Old Testament were no longer unclean for Christians to eat (“Nothing is unclean in itself,”

Rom. 14:14), and therefore the action of eating pork (for example) was not morally wrong in itself. But it could bring a wrongful result, and in those cases it should not be done:

For if your brother is grieved by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love. By what you eat, do not destroy the one for whom Christ died. So do not let what you regard as good be spoken of as evil. (Rom. 14:15–16; see also 1 Cor. 8:13; 10:24)

In writing to the Corinthian church, Paul concluded a long section of advice with a general requirement for them to consider the results of their actions: “Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31).

We need to consider all four of these dimensions for any action: (1) the action itself, (2) attitudes, (3) motives, and (4) results. An action that is pleasing to God will follow the teachings of Scripture in all four of these areas.

5. Most Actions Contain a Mix of Different Attitudes, Motives, and Results. Even simple actions can involve a complex mixture of *attitudes*. Any parent who has been awakened in the middle of the night to care for a sick child will attest to feeling deep love for the child, but also perhaps mild irritation or even resentment at the interruption of a sound sleep, coupled with thankfulness to God for the privilege of being a parent, plus a slight tinge of anxiety about being able to do a good job at work the next day with less sleep, plus concern about whether the disturbance

will wake the other children, plus a deep sense of peace at knowing God's presence, plus a renewed sense of gratitude for the sacrifices made by his or her own parents, plus perhaps a bit of weariness and discouragement because of having so many responsibilities, and so forth. Our hearts are complex, and we are capable of having multiple attitudes at once in any given situation.

Then our *motives* for an action might be mixed. While our primary motive for giving time or money to a church or charitable organization might be to further the work of the church and to earn heavenly rewards from God, there might also be a small bit of desire to gain recognition from others. It is often difficult to know our own hearts or to fully understand our motives for our actions.

As for *results*, while we can usually predict the most likely outcome of an action, it is seldom possible to predict the results with certainty or to know how extensive the results will be. Often people are surprised by the "unintended consequences" of their actions. For example, someone could make a business investment in a morally good project (a right action), with right attitudes and motives, but have bad results (the investment could fail and the principal be lost, perhaps because the investment was in a product for which there was no consumer demand).²

But these complexities do not mean that it is impossible to know or to evaluate the attitudes, motives, and results

2. A tragic biblical example of unforeseen results is Jephthah's foolish vow in Judg. 11:30–31.

of an action. Usually we can know the dominant attitudes and dominant motives for an action (at least for ourselves). It is often possible to predict the most likely results that will come from an action. Therefore, we can analyze these four factors when considering any particular action or situation.

C. NINE SOURCES OF INFORMATION AND GUIDANCE

As I mentioned earlier, sometimes there is no time to ponder a decision, and a person simply has to use his or her best judgment at the moment and make the decision quickly. But at other times there is more opportunity to ponder it, and in that case, several different sources of information should be considered, especially if the decision is quite significant.

Here are nine sources of information to consider.

1. Information from the Bible. Our first source of information about any ethical decision should be the teachings of the Bible. The Bible is our only source of inerrant and absolutely authoritative ethical guidance.

2. Information from Studying the Situation. Jesus gives examples from ordinary life that illustrate how people typically learn more about a situation before they agree to a course of action:

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? Otherwise, when he has laid

Every Christian at one time or another has probably asked, *What is God's will for me in this situation?* In this accessible booklet, Wayne Grudem offers practical guidance on how to make biblically informed decisions through the guidance of the Holy Spirit in accordance with God's word.

TOPICS INCLUDE:

- *The role that circumstances and feelings should play in making decisions*
- *How Scripture informs daily choices*
- *What it means to be led by the Holy Spirit*

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The *What the Bible Says About* series was adapted from Wayne Grudem's *Christian Ethics* in order to equip Christians with biblical answers to common ethical dilemmas.

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