

THE COMPASS

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FUTURE TENSE? Figuring Out God's Will

Part 4:

Decisions, Decisions

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So I have to move, and I'm moving into this apartment building, and there are two apartments available.

One on the front of the building — some advantages, some disadvantages, to this location.

The other one is at the back of the building — different advantages and disadvantages to this one.

Which one should I take?

We've been looking at figuring out God's will — and I'd like to know which of these two apartments will be in God's will for me to take?

(I need a bracelet that says WWJR — Where Would Jesus Rent?)

Which apartment will it please God for me to rent?

Which apartment is the perfect apartment, and which one is wrong for me?

Or my vacation is coming up. Will I take my family up north? Or down south?

Or my car is dying, and I'll have to get a new one. Will I buy the Mercedes or the BMW?
(I am fantasizing, this is obvious.)

Or I'm single, and two wonderful Christian women both want to marry me. (OK, I've got to cut this out now.)

In other words, I'm making a decision between one good thing and another good thing — not a clear-cut good vs. bad situation, and not on some big moral issue like murder or sexual purity or something.

Not something the Bible addresses explicitly.

Which includes probably 90% of the decisions I make on a day-to-day basis.

This is the stuff of life.

How do I decide?

We've already established that God gives me freedom.

You can go back and check out the talk entitled "Bad at Darts," part 2 of this 4-part series.

Unless there's some prohibition in the Bible, or God clearly speaks to me about it, or I just can't get a sense of peace about it, then I'm free.

Free to do what I like — because God is actually guiding my likes and dislikes.

Psalm 37:4 says, "Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart."

He will be the one planting desires in my heart — as his response to my trusting him.

OK, but now I'm facing this choice — and I know I'm free to choose between the two options — but it's making me crazy.

Doesn't God give me any guidelines for making this decision?
Any lenses to clarify my perspective?

Yeah, there are lenses.

I can go to God kind of like I to go an optometrist.

You know when you go to the eye doctor, how he lowers this big contraption in front of your face, and it has all these various lenses, and he lowers first one, then the next, and he says something like, "Which is better — one? Or two?"

So say I choose #2.

Then he goes to the next level of clarity, and offers another pair of options: "Now which is better — three? Or four?"

And then "Five? Or six?"

And so on.

Well, there's a series of lenses like this in the Bible, which we can look through to determine which way we want to go in one of these day-to-day decision situations.

The more of these lenses we look through, the clearer our vision can become.
Here they are:

I can look through Lens #1: the "Two Things."

How does this choice stack up against the "Two Things" — loving God and loving people?

Jesus said in **Matthew 22:37-40** that these are what life is all about. These are the two most important things in the world.

Is there anything about this decision that affects my love for God, or my love for the people around me?

When I envision taking this route, can I envision myself loving God better and loving people better as a result?

Then that's the way to go.

Here's an example. In today's marketplace, a lot of people work virtually — they work from home, they interact with their fellow workers or their customers online.

But sometimes there's a project you have to be on-site for.

So there was this couple who had lived in one part of the country for about 15 years, and then they had a major work project that required them to move across the country, away from all their friends and familiar routines.

A couple years later, the project was over, and they could stay where they were, or move back to where they came from.

There was no reason to stay, no reason to go — except that they had a community full of people to love back where they came from.

They calculated that they were better able to love people — they could love more people, care for more people, serve more people — in one place than in the other.

So that's where they headed. To a place where, the way they saw it, they could love God more by loving people more.

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I can look through Lens #2: the concept of "stewardship."

The Scriptures repeatedly refer to us as "stewards" or "managers."

In some places, instead of being translated stewardship or management, the word is translated dispensation — the "dispensing" of the owner's resources.

God has given us everything we have. We don't own a thing.

All we have is the privilege of dispensing it, managing it, stewarding it wisely.

You think you earn a paycheck? Nope. God provides a paycheck for you; he gives your employer the privilege of distributing it to you.

According to **Deuteronomy 8:17,18**, "**You may say to yourself, 'My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.' But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth....**"

God makes me a steward or manager of *his* money.

So what will honor him most in this situation? Is there one decision or another that will qualify as better stewardship of the resources he's entrusted to me?

Is one of my options going to produce more resources for ministry?

Is one of my options going to free up more of my time for things of the spirit — more of my money, more of my energy?

Maybe that's the way to go, then.

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I can look through Lens #3: the wisdom of friends.

What do my wise friends say?

The Bible says in **Proverbs 11:14 (NKJV)**, "**Where there is no counsel, the people fall; But in the multitude of counselors there is safety.**"

But I recommend you only ask friends you really respect. People whose opinion on the subject you can really trust.

This may seem like trifling advice, but I have found it to be one of the most valuable strategies in my life.

I somehow got the idea early in life that it was embarrassing to ask for directions.

Maybe it's a guy thing.

But I applied this philosophy to my entire life. I didn't want any counseling. That would make me look weak. I didn't want any advice. I wanted to look smart, self-sufficient.

But after I had crashed a few times — and these were some pretty spectacular crashes — I started asking for advice just out of my pain and embarrassment at crashing so bad!

And I found that someone who loves me, and who has either succeeded or failed or both in the realm of life where I'm facing a decision, is a pretty good source of wisdom!

I can skip a lot of anxiety before a decision — and a lot of heartache after a decision — by first asking a trusted friend who has been down the road ahead of me.

I have certain friends I will ask about money issues.

I have certain friends I can trust on relationship issues.
 I have a couple friends I feel I can ask just about anything, and they will still love me.
 They won't judge me for the way I'm thinking, or the question I'm asking.
 It hasn't always been this way in my life — I have only come into these kinds of
 relationships in recent years.
 I went years without.
 And I can tell you, life's better this way than the way it was before.

But let's also look for a moment at the sad alternative.
 I have dealt with a number of people down through the years — these would be
 committed Christ-followers who are long-time members of churches and pretty
 heavily involved in what we might call "the work of Christ" — but they hold back
 from letting their Christian friends see into their lives.
 I'm not criticizing them; I was one of them, for many years.

One of the big areas where this happens is with finances.
 Let's say there's a reputable financial planner in my church group — someone I know
 and like.
 But to get the help and wisdom of this person — to do business with this person on a
 professional basis — I have to reveal the details of my financial situation to them.
 I have to let them know what I spend and how and why; what I'm saving and how and
 why; and so on and so forth.
 I don't want to? No, I don't. I don't want this person, who's at such close range, to know
 about the details of my financial life.
 Hmm. What does this mean?
 Someone in the same church group with me, someone presumably more or less on the
 same spiritual journey as me, someone I ought to trust *more* than other people —
 I don't.
 Is it because I don't trust them to keep my secrets?
 Is it because if they don't approve of the choices I've made, I'll be embarrassed?
 Maybe it's because my church group really isn't based on trust — we're about
 something else?

I don't know. I can't answer this question for you. I can only answer it for me.
 I can tell you that in these types of situations, for me, it has always been about approval.
 I didn't fear someone blabbing my secrets as much as I feared someone disapproving
 of me in some way.
 As long as you don't know me well, I can get your approval. I can manipulate your
 response to me.
 But as soon as I reveal the inside truth about me, I lose that control.

I don't want you to know what I spent \$3,514 on last year.
 I don't want you to know about that foolish thing I pulled money out of the bank to invest
 in.
 I don't want you to know how little of my paycheck I save.
 I don't want you to know how I've run up my credit card debt.

So there's enormous pressure to hide. To cover up.

There's disincentive to look through Lens #3, the wisdom of friends.

I have to push back against my own fear in order to access the gift that God has given me: a community of people who are on the journey with me, who have had experiences I haven't had yet, who have insights I haven't gained yet, who can share their perspectives with me to help me make the choices I have to make in life.

God wired me for community, for relationships — he not only wired me to love people, he also wired people to love me.

I need to roll the dice and reach out and take advantage of this.

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And then, there's a fourth and final lens that I can look through when I'm facing a choice between various acceptable options.

Lens #4 is the joy quotient.

When I think about my options, does the thought of one option give me greater joy than the others?

If God is really directing my desires, as **Psalm 37:4** says — if I want his guidance — then God is working in me.

God is giving me a greater desire for one option than the other option.

I was talking with a friend a few days ago, she's in the healthcare industry, and she's at a crossroads in her practice.

She said what she would really enjoy doing would be to treat babies, even though this would make her practice less financially viable — in other words, she would make less money.

So what she felt she ought to do was to keep treating adults, and make the steady money.

I said, Oh wow, go do babies. Absolutely. Don't choose the thing that gives you no joy, simply out of financial pressure.

If you choose the thing you feel obligated to, instead of the thing that gives you joy, you'll be miserable. Or you'll feel cheated. Defeated. You'll always wonder if you couldn't have been more fulfilled in your work.

Imagine someone giving you free airline tickets; you can go wherever you want.

But it just so happens that at the same time, your church is setting up a missions trip — they're going to go work on some project in some foreign country, and just the thought of it gives you the willies. It doesn't appeal to you at all.

So you look at these airline tickets, and you're thinking, Man, what I want to do is take my family to Hawaii!

But what I feel I ought to do is get on board with this missions trip.

I say — Aloha! Take your family to Hawaii.

Choose out of obligation, and your heart's not in it, it's not authentic.

It doesn't count.

But on the other hand, if you choose the thing that you think will give you joy, you may find after a time that it doesn't give you joy at all — and then you might find that your feelings about the other option have changed.

You may be able to go back and do missions later, with actual joy.
 You may be able to go back and treat adults in your medical practice, with actual joy.
 You may find what's really fulfilling to you.
 What you're really wired for.

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But it's also possible that I can use all four of these lenses, and still not have clarity on my decision.
 I can look at Thing 1 and Thing 2 and say, No, honestly, none of my options is going to affect my ability to love God and to love God by loving people.
 I can say, No, this isn't a stewardship issue.
 And my friends don't have any wisdom for me — one guy says go through Door A, my other friend says go through Door B.
 And I can imagine either one of my choices making me equally happy.
 So these four lenses haven't helped me.

If this decision is making me crazy — if it's on my mind all the time, if it's bugging me — what's the story?

God has promised me peace. He's designed me for peace.
 Paul wrote to the Christians at Colosse: **“Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since ... you were called to peace” (Colossians 3:15).**
 This is what I can experience in my relationship with him.

So what's really happening?

If I don't have peace, I must have a trust issue. I must not really be trusting God to give me his best in this situation.

Furthermore, frankly, I'm making something difficult that God doesn't consider difficult; I'm making something important in a way that it really isn't that important.

I mean, choosing between two jobs, for example, can be hugely important — but with God guaranteeing me that he will bring about his best in any situation, and with my having given the entire thing to God but without getting any clear indication which way I should go — then I need to stop imagining risk.

I don't have any more risk taking the job in Houston than I have by taking the job in Seattle.

So — what do I do?

To get past this agonizing — here's what I need to do:

I've got to “decide to decide.”

If I can't just make an arbitrary choice today and feel comfortable with that, then I need to take my calendar, circle to a date sometime in the future — and decide to make a decision on that date.

If I decide to decide at a later date, then I can just walk away from this issue. Forget about it. Live my life.

If God intervenes and something interrupts me with more information on this issue — say the phone rings and the guy in Houston offers me more money for the same job — well, now, this changes things!

But if nothing new comes up, I can just take a break from this decision. Wait and see.

And then, on “D-Day” — Decision Day — I can see how I feel about it.
 Has my joy quotient changed? Am I inclined to go one way or the other?
 If not, then I can make what amounts to an arbitrary choice.
 Because I have given this decision enough time. Enough energy. I’ve given God every
 chance to set my course, or change my course.
 Now I can fling myself into the future, and trust him totally.

Jesus offered us some assurance on this.

He said, in the simplest possible terms, **“He who belongs to God hears what God says” (John 8:47).**

If I have given myself to God, then what I’m hearing on this issue is what God wants me to hear.

If I don’t hear anybody saying anything, then I can just go for it. I’m free.
 I can do what I feel like doing. I can go either way, and I’m OK.

We need to understand that if we give ourselves to God, his Spirit is going to be active in us — so if I am choosing badly, I am going to sense a pang of anxiety or uneasiness when I think about going in that unhealthy direction.

This is what our lead pastor David G. Brown calls “inherent permission.”

As God’s child, I have inherent permission to do what I want unless I hear otherwise from him.

My agonizing over choices is a waste of energy. It breaks God’s heart to see me wringing my hands.

In **Deuteronomy 1:31-33**, the Bible says, Look at how God has already taken care of you — that’s evidence that he’s going to keep taking care of you.

It says, **“...You saw how the Lord your God carried you, as a father carries his son, all the way you went until you reached this place. In spite of this, you did not trust in the Lord your God, who went ahead of you on your journey....”**

Did you know that even as godly a guy as the psalmist David had to keep working on this his whole life?

He had to keep telling himself the truth.

In **Psalms 31:6-8** he says:

6 ...I trust in the Lord.

7 I will be glad and rejoice in your love, for you saw my affliction and knew the anguish of my soul.

8 You have not handed me over to the enemy but have set my feet in a spacious place.

This spacious place that he’s talking about is a place of freedom.

A place for enjoying life.

It’s a place for enjoying our position as sons and daughters of God.

We’re his children — we’re not robots, and we’re not slaves.

God has given us the gift of free will, and we can enjoy using this gift.

We can make choices, make decisions, take steps without fear — knowing that God is with us.

Rebecca Radmacher-Brown likes to say: “If you want God's will, you have it.”

Philippians 2:13 says, “...It is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose.”

“To will and to act” could just as easily be translated “to want and to do.”

God is delighted when I turn my life over to him — I'm giving him a gift, and he won't squander it.

He's going to help me. Guide me. He's going to use even a decision that feels arbitrary to me, to achieve his best for my life.

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Now — why does this feel so fake?

Why does it feel too simple?

What is wrong with this?

If it feels fake, or over-simplistic, or wrong, it's because there is someone whose job it is to persuade me that it's not true.

Satan's fulltime job is to deceive me, to tell me that God isn't telling me the truth, that God can't be trusted, that I'm a fool to believe it's this simple.

Jesus said in **John 8:44** that lying is Satan's “**native language**,” and he will just *kill* you with this stuff.

He loves it when I'm paralyzed with indecision.

He loves it when I'm not living my life, I'm not moving forward, I'm not productive, I'm not proactively loving God by loving people, accomplishing anything of value.

He loves it when I'm sitting at home worrying about which socks God wants me to wear.

Satan is a salesman, and he's got three products in his product line.

First there's fear. When I buy this product, I worry that God isn't telling me the truth about how he's going to take care of me.

Then there's pride. With this product, I believe I don't need God, don't need to operate according to his design.

And then there's my favorite — the most effective product in the whole line: distraction.

This is where I'm just not paying attention, not looking in the right direction — so I'm missing what's important.

I'm fixated on a decision that's not worthy of fixation.

When I buy Satan's product line, he's able to keep me inactive. Ineffective.

But God has a product line, too. Just two products. Love God. Love people.

When I buy God's product line — when I focus on loving people, plain and simple — then the question of which socks to wear or which job to take or whether to go north or south moves into its proper perspective.

I can see myself as a runner.

I'm running a race.

Four different places in the New Testament, our walk with God is described as a race.

There's a sense of forward movement to our lives.

We're not designed to stand still.

1 Corinthians 9: says, “...Run in such a way as to get the prize.”

But imagine a member of the Olympic track team, competing in the 100-meter dash,
and worrying about where to step.

It would be impossible to run, impossible to win the race.

The runner has to trust that the ground ahead of him is level enough for running — solid
enough for running — so he can plunge ahead.

He can “press toward the goal.”

Teaching my teenage daughter to drive, she was really nervous about speed.

If anything could be done with the car in “park,” she wanted to do it.

Pulling out of a parking space, or pulling away from a stop, she wanted to turn the
steering wheel first, get the wheels in the right direction, before she let her foot
off the brake.

But to turn the steering wheel while the car is stopped is really hard.

Steering is easy if the car is moving.

I think a lot of us want God to turn the steering wheel while we’re standing still.

But God steers moving ships.

If I trust him to steer, then I can move ahead.

If there’s a simple three-word thesis for decision-making in life, it would be “Just do it.”

Get going. Let God steer. He’s a good driver.