

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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What should I do? - Doing in Dependence

I have had quite a few people work for me down the years but have found that not all staff are equally productive. People who have to be directly instructed before they will do anything, and who stop working at the slightest excuse, can be very frustrating. Just as bad are the 'independent spirits'. These people find endless things to do and are never idle. The problem is that none of the things they do are what you asked for! Activity is not the only characteristic you want in an employee. That activity has to be directed into the areas that the boss requires.

Our current theme is, "What should I do?" Every Christian should be thinking about doing things. James instructs us to "Be doers of the word, and not hearers only" James 1:22. Clearly inactivity is not acceptable, but our activity must be controlled by God's word. In 4:15, James goes on to say that all our activities and plans should be expressly subject to God's will. "You ought to say, 'If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.'" Our doing must be in dependence on the Lord.

Doing in dependence requires four things:

- Knowledge of God's will
- Submission to God's will
- Readiness to act
- Vigour and enthusiasm.

1. Knowledge of God's will

Countless sermons and books have been produced on how to know God's will and I do not have much time to devote to this large topic today. I am going to look at it in one simple way: learning to think like God does. If I could look at a situation from the same standpoint as God, consider it with the same priorities as Him, have the same feelings in my heart about the participants and possible outcomes and have the same desire for righteousness and honour, then I will know what God's will is for that situation. Looked at this way, understanding God's will is less about visions, signs and circumstances. All too often these things seem to be desirable because we have very little in common with God and no idea what He wants. If we stop looking for visions and learn instead to think like God, then understanding His will becomes an integral part of getting to know Him and being transformed into His image.

If we want to think like God there are some essential characteristics of God that we need to consider...

God is:

- Eternal**
- Love**
- Light**
- Giving**

God is eternal

God is eternal and therefore takes a very long view of things. Immediate results and consequences, although important, may matter much less to Him than the consequences in a hundred years time. Since we live in time for less than a hundred years, you might think we have fallen at the first hurdle. However 1 John 5:11 says, "God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son." So we are eternal and are capable of learning to think on that basis. Moses did. He chose "rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin, esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt." Hebrews 11:25.

God is love

"God is love" 1 John 4:8. This means that if I am to think like Him I will need to learn to let His love inform all my thinking. All too often our actions are motivated by anger, hurt, resentment or simple selfishness.

God is light

“God is light” 1 John 1:5. The consequence of this is that His will can never involve me being underhand or dishonest or doing anything that I would not be happy for the whole world to see in broad daylight.

God is giving

The words of the Lord Jesus to the Samaritan women in John 4:10 could be translated, “If you knew the giving God”. The Lord is extraordinarily generous and unselfish. His thoughts focus on the blessing of others and are characterised by things like mercy, grace and longsuffering.

This might all sound rather abstract and impractical but when applied to everyday life it can totally transform things. Imagine a man has just argued with his wife. He is angry and still thinks he was right and his wife is being unreasonable. What is God’s will for Him in that situation? Is it to see the man vindicated at the expense of his wife? Is it for him to sulk for a while until his wife apologises? It is impossible to see how those things would fit with the characteristics of God that we have just been considering or with the “mind of Christ” referred to in 1 Corinthians 2:16. A few seconds thought will make clear God’s will in this everyday scenario. I firmly believe that every time we make choices with God in situations like these, we learn to think the same way He does and so find it a little easier to see His will in less clear cut situations.

Of course, God does use things like circumstances to guide His children. In Acts 16:6-11 Paul is directed by the Spirit using various mechanisms including circumstances and visions. This guidance though was a kind of ‘fine tuning’. Paul knew that God’s will was for him to be devoted to the spread of the Gospel and Paul was totally committed to following that will. He was ready to respond quickly to exact directions from the Spirit because he was already in the mainstream of God’s will.

2. Submission to God’s will

Of course, doing in dependence requires more than knowing what God wants. It also means **doing** what He wants. My children generally find doing what I want rather harder than knowing what I want! Not because I ask them to do difficult or unreasonable things, but because they have a will of their own. “Time for bed”, I say. Nothing too hard there: three words, each only one syllable. The meaning is clear and the task is quite easy. Funny how it can be so hard to obey! I am thinking long term, larger consequences and character building. In other words, “These children have school in the morning and will be tired, grumpy and unmanageable tomorrow if they do not go to sleep soon. They also need to learn regular habits and respect for parents!” My children are thinking immediate term only. “We have got loads more things we want to do and they are all more exciting than going to bed!” Another clash of wills is about to occur! Does this sound rather like your relationship with God? One of the reasons I talked about knowing God’s will in terms of thinking like God is that it helps enormously when it comes to obedience. If I am thinking like God I am much more likely to do what He desires. It might still cost me something. Think how much it cost Christ to do God’s will at Calvary, but I will be ready to face the cost and regard it as worthwhile.

Submission is not something that comes naturally to many of us, so let’s take a quick look at some of the negatives and positives of submission.

Negative aspects of submission

- I do not get to have my own way all the time
- I am not allowed to put myself first
- My pride is hurt
- I feel like I am on a leash.

Did you notice that all of these negative aspects start with ‘I’ or ‘My’? Ever since Adam fell, men and women have been pushing God out of the middle of their lives and putting themselves in His place. One of the many problems created by putting me in the centre is that I have to do so much. I must make sure my will gets done. I must push myself forward to get what I deserve. I must defend my honour and rights. I must defend my liberty, even at significant cost to others. I find myself constantly driven to try and reorganize the universe so that it suits me. The battle is endless. Of course everybody else in the world is trying to do the same and we cannot possibly all succeed!

Positive aspects of submission

- Somebody else is responsible for the outcome
- A promise of help is given
- Peace replaces worry.

Reversing the process and putting God back at the centre is not natural to us and it hurts rather a lot. However, once I have put God back in place and learnt to submit, I can start to relax a little! Now **God** is responsible for all the planning and the outcomes and I just need to do my small part. Instead of being responsible for many things but having little real power, I now have the promise of the help of the God of infinite resource in anything He asks me to do. "And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus." Philippians 4:19. Previously I had endless worries about what might go wrong. These were compounded by my lack of control over most of the big things in life. Now they have been replaced by the peace of trusting implicitly in the One who is always in control and gives His own peace to His children. "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God; and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus." Philippians 4:6-7.

Before we leave this section on submission to God's will let's briefly consider four questions that we can ask ourselves the next time we are struggling to accept God's will.

Can God be trusted?

This is one of those questions that sounds foolish as soon as you say it out loud, but it is easier to smile at the foolishness of the question than to fully trust God. We can answer the question from the Bible by quoting verses like Proverbs 3:5, "Trust in the LORD with all your heart". We can also answer it by pointing to incidents in the Bible such as when Shadrach, Meshach and Abed-Nego trusted God when faced with the threat of being burned to death. This story is recorded in Daniel chapter 3. However none of these answers give us quite the same confidence as when we can look back on our **own** experience of trusting God and finding Him reliable.

Does God know what He is doing?

This is another question that we can ask ourselves the next time we are faced with a difficult situation. We can answer this question very easily, of course. God always knows much more about any situation than we do. Imagine that we are in a maze constructed of high bushes. We can only see a little way in front of us and must try and remember what we have passed through previously. Now imagine that we have a friend sat high up in a tree overlooking the maze who can see exactly where we are. Better still, he has a map showing the best route out! The Lord is in the position of the man in the tree with the map. We need to learn to trust His directions: He knows what He is doing!

Has God considered every angle?

Perhaps God is taking an overly simplistic view. I know He wants me to do this but has He really thought through all the possible consequences for me and my family? Of course the answer has to be "Yes". Faith has to believe that God knows precisely what He is doing and accept that the outcome will be for the best, even if I suffer by it personally. Consider the two groups of believers mentioned near the end of Hebrews chapter 11. The first group sound like the heroes of faith we all want to emulate, "Who through faith subdued kingdoms, worked righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, became valiant in battle, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. Women received their dead raised to life again." The second group is rather less likely to get volunteers. "Others were tortured, not accepting deliverance, that they might obtain a better resurrection. Still others had trial of mockings and scourgings, yes, and of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented". However it is of this second group that the writer says, "Of whom the world was not worthy". Faith has to reckon with the fact that God may choose to assign us to the second group.

3. Readiness to act

So you know God's will and are ready to submit to it. What are you waiting for? After Joshua and the army of Israel had been chased away by a few men from the little city of Ai, Joshua fell on his face before the ark of the Lord and mourned for hours. He asked God why He had brought Israel so far, just to let them fail now. The Lord's response is rather direct. "Get up! Why do you lie thus on your face? ... Get up, sanctify the people" Joshua 7:10 and 13. No doubt it was right to mourn at first but now it was time for action. The battle for Ai had followed the great victory at Jericho and perhaps Joshua had been too complacent. We have no record of him asking God about the battle plan and he took his generals' advice to just send a small detachment to take this minor city. Maybe Joshua's reasoning had gone something like this. "God is fighting for Israel, God promised us this land and God made me His leader over Israel. This next battle should be pretty simple after Jericho..." There was no lack of action but an apparent lack of dependence. Then humiliating defeat had occurred. This was bad enough in itself but if the rest of the people in Canaan heard how Israel had been humiliated they would stop quaking at the thought of Israel's advance and start thinking about striking back, hard. Now Joshua was in danger of being all dependence and no action! God tells Joshua that he knows what he must do and it is time to get on with it.

Haggai was sent to sort out another problem of inaction. When the Israelites first returned to Jerusalem from the captivity in Babylon they had begun to rebuild God's temple. They had got a foundation laid, which is always a good start, but then their enemies had prevented further progress. That had been around fourteen years ago. Since they had been prevented from working on God's house, they got busy working on their own houses instead. Soon they became so busy working for themselves and so comfortable in their expensive houses that if anybody suggested they start work on God's house their response was, "The time has not come, the time that the LORD's house should be built." Haggai 1:2. Haggai was sent by the Lord to remind them that we must always put Him and His work to the top of our 'to do' list. Through Haggai, God promised that if the Israelites would get active building His house then God would stop sending them the difficulties He had been using to try and turn them to Himself and start blessing them immediately. "From this day I will bless you", God said in Haggai 2:19.

Has the Lord made His will clear to you about some task He wants you to do? Then what are you waiting for? Israel lost fourteen years of blessing in Haggai's day because they neglected the work God had given them. The Lord Jesus clearly stated God's priority for us in Mathew 6:33 "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you."

4. Vigour and enthusiasm

"Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might", Ecclesiastes 9:10. This was the advice of the wise King Solomon. It is still good advice today. Service for the Lord is not meant to be drudgery.

Some years after Haggai's prophecy the people were at work again. The temple was complete and now they were building the walls of Jerusalem. There is a rather unflattering description of one group of workers in Nehemiah 3:5. "Next to them the Tekoites made repairs, but their nobles did not put their shoulders to the work of their Lord". Perhaps the nobles amongst the Tekoites thought they were above manual labour. Maybe they thought they could sit back and let others take up the slack; after all nobody would notice so long as the job got done. But **God** noticed and instructed Nehemiah to write it down, and these men are permanently recorded as examples of how not to work for God! Happily the ordinary people of Tekoa did not follow this bad example and in verse 27 of the same chapter we find them repairing "another section" of the wall. It seems they got on quickly with their first section and then, instead of sitting back and taking it easy, they enthusiastically moved on to another section.

Sometimes we complain about how much we do for the Lord and His people and how little it is appreciated. We describe the tasks we are involved in as if they were the labours of Hercules and we were worn down with the weight of them. I must confess that I sometimes feel worn down by Christian work but I have learnt to recognise this as a sign that something has gone wrong. Not that work for the Lord is always easy. Paul recognised that we can become "weary in well doing" and warned both the Galatians and the Thessalonians about this danger in Galatians 6:9 and 2 Thessalonians 3:13. Paul himself felt the "care of all the churches" as something of a burden. The Lord Jesus didn't promise that we would not have any burdens; He promised that He would share them with us. The disciples considered it a privilege and joy to be allowed to serve the Lord and so should we.

During our holidays my family and I often help at a preserved steam railway in Wales. We work at fairly simple tasks and will often be repairing fences, clearing weeds or digging holes. Oddly enough it never seems like work. If you are chatting to the person next to you, you can soon forget that your back aches and that the rain is dribbling down your neck again! Good company and a good cause can lift most tasks to the level of enjoyment. Our work for the Lord Jesus is not only **for** Him but also **with** Him. Whenever I have stopped working enthusiastically and started complaining, I know I have stopped enjoying the Lord's company and resorted to doing things in my own strength. The solution is not to soldier on stoically, give up in disgust or try and manufacture my own enthusiasm. The only right response is to take some time to refresh and renew my relationship with Christ.

In Conclusion

Activity is vital. If there is no activity it suggests there is no real life. But it is also vital that it is the right activity, done in the right spirit. Let's all 'be doing' in this coming week, but let's make sure we are 'doing in dependence'.

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