

Growing Spiritually

Advance in Faith 1, Unit 6



Week 5 – Seeking Guidance, and Confession



Introduction

Remember that the Spiritual Disciplines are given to us as a means to experience God. They are pathways into the fullness of life and community that He has designed for us. They are the means by which we grow spiritually and continue to become a royal priesthood.

While there are certain things about being a Christian that are intensely personal, by far the overwhelming emphasis of our faith is on community.

For this reason, the spiritual disciplines also involve activities that are corporate or community focused. Our goal this week is to introduce some of these to you and examine how they may operate in your life.

The New Testament integrates the idea of personal growth and community or collective growth:

Ephesians 4:11-16

“It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. Then we will no longer be infants, tossed back and forth by the waves, and blown here and there by every wind of teaching and by the cunning and craftiness of men in their deceitful scheming. Instead, speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ. From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work”.

The goal for discipline is GROWTH.

Hebrews 10:25

“Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another - and all the more as you see the Day approaching”.

Seeking Guidance

“God does guide the individual richly and profoundly, but he also guides groups of people and can instruct the individual through the group experience.”¹

Seeking God’s guidance can be both a personal and corporate experience. **Acts 15:1-28** is a wonderful example of the discipline of seeking God’s guidance in the context of community while **Mark 1:35** is a good example of seeking God’s guidance in solitude.

The obvious question that arises for most is “How do we know what God wants? How does one discern His will?”

When we speak of the “will of God” it is important to recognise that there are 3 different aspects to His will:

a) The SOVEREIGN will of God

This aspect of God’s will is hidden in his heart and mind. You can’t resist it, oppose it or overcome it because God presides sovereignly over it and watches over it in order to bring it to pass. It is the invisible hand of God at work in and around human history. This aspect of God’s will is and will always be shrouded in mystery. The good news is that you can’t miss it, simply because you can’t know it so the only appropriate response on our part to this aspect of God’s will is to TRUST Him with it. To trust that He will have His way and that ultimately His plan and purpose for humanity and for His Kingdom will come to pass in His time.

b) The MORAL will of God

This aspect of God’s will is clearly REVEALED. It is unambiguous and easily accessible because it is revealed and recorded in the pages of scripture in the form of commands, prohibitions, instructions, principles and statements of wisdom. Our responsibility is to become familiar with this revelation and then submit to it, apply it and obey it. It is common to all of us. God’s moral will for you, is the same as God’s moral will for me and wholehearted SUBMISSION is the only appropriate response to this aspect of God’s revealed will.

c) The SPECIFIC will of God

This is the area where most people get stuck. What does God want from me and for me and how am I going to know what He wants? *Who should I marry? Where should I live? What house should I buy?*

¹ R. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1980), p. 218

What career path should I follow? What investments should I make? The list goes on and on. The question of “God’s will” usually arises when we are confronted with these kinds of questions.

For the majority of the time God’s will for you as an individual will be to apply His wisdom to the myriad of choices and decisions that you have to make on a day-to-day basis. That wisdom is available through His Word and by His Spirit and as we apply it and learn from the results we grow in our ability to discern His ways over our own ways.

Sometimes the motivation for asking the question “What does God want?” is a genuine desire to please God - we want to live lives that He would approve of - but at other times it can simply be an attempt to avoid responsibility for the decisions we have to make. If we can say “God said...” then no-one can argue with us because how can God be wrong! And if God tells you to do something and it all goes wrong then you can still blame God!

On some occasions and at certain critical intersections of our lives we may be faced with a decision or choices that require (or attract) clear direction from God. At these critical intersections the leading of the Holy Spirit becomes essential to making a good decision.

Aspect of God’s Will	Nature of God’s Will	Our Response
Sovereign	Hidden In the Mind of God	Trust Completely
Moral	Revealed By the Word of God	Obey Wholeheartedly
Individual (specific)	Realised Through the Wisdom of God	Choose Wisely

“The will of God is discovered as we become acquainted with God, learn His ways and become His friend.”²

² R. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1980), p. 233

Hearing from Holy Spirit

Sometimes the subjective nature of “hearing the voice of God” (discerning the leading of Holy Spirit) causes people to shy away from any attempts to listen for and respond to His inner guidance. While this may seem like a “safer” option it is definitely the “poorer” option and as a result diminishes the richness of a life lived in *relationship* with God.

Some helpful principles when listening for the voice of the Spirit:

- a) **The Spirit and Word Will Always Agree**
(1 John 5:7-8)
God will not move you by His Spirit to do something He has prohibited in His Word.

- b) **Communal Agreement Provides Confirmation**
(Acts 15:28)
Every truth is established by the mouths of two or three witnesses. Confirmation comes through the resonance felt in the hearts of those you share life and faith with.

- c) **The Spirit Glorifies the Son**
(John 16:14)
God’s Spirit will always reveal and glorify the Son of God to the hearts and minds of men and women. Spirit inspired actions are consistent with the character of God revealed in His Son.

- d) **Obedience to God Usually Requires Selfless Surrender and Sacrifice**
(Acts 9:13-16)
The leading of the Spirit will often call for service, sacrifice or self-denial. These are often good signs that you are hearing from God because they don’t come naturally to us.

- e) **Seek Wisdom and Caution in Your Interpretation and Application**
(Acts 10)
Often the Spirit of God will supply a “word of knowledge” or “word of wisdom” i.e. a partial revelation of insight, information or instruction (see 1 Corinthians 12/14). Communicating that revelation to others or acting upon it yourself requires wisdom, restraint and ongoing dependence on God.

Seeking Guidance in Community

Guidance from God in the context of our gathering together can take several forms:

**a) Teaching and Preaching
(2 Timothy 3:16-17)**

The proclamation of God's Word done in the grace and power of the Spirit brings instruction and revelation to the hearts of listeners who are inspired by the same Spirit to trust and obey.

**b) Prophecy
(1 Corinthians 14)**

Believers moved by the Spirit of God can proclaim messages for the collective benefit of a gathering of God's people. These messages are to be "tested" by those present and weighed against the established truth of God's Word and the witness of the congregation.

**c) Counsel
(Acts 15:1-28)**

Dialogue and discussion held in an attitude of dependence on God will lead to decisions and actions that honour Him and edify the others.

Confession

Augustine of Hippo made the following observation

"The confession of evil works is the beginning of good works".³

The confession of sins is a biblical imperative as exhibited in 1 John 1:9

1 John 1:9

"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness."

³ R. Foster, *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1980), p. 179

There is a process here:

1st... We confess.

2nd... God is faithful and just and will forgive.

3rd... Forgiveness leads to a changed life.

Salvation is both an event and a process (sanctification). Confession of sins, both to God and to one another, is a part of the process.

James 5:16

“Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes:

“A man who confesses his sins in the presence of a brother knows that he is no longer alone with himself; he experiences the presence of God in the reality of another person. As long as I am by myself in the confession of my sins everything remains in the dark but in the presence of a brother the sin has to be brought into the light.”⁴

Does this mean we should confess our sins to any person who may be handy?

Foster suggests the following guidelines:

- 1) Ask God for the right person.
- 2) Exercise wisdom and discernment.
- 3) Someone who will treat you with dignity.⁵

How should we confess? St Alphonsus Liguori writes,

“For a good confession three things are necessary...”

- 1) Examination of the conscience.
- 2) Sorrow and repentance.

⁴ Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, p.184

⁵ Ibid., p. 187

- 3) A determination to avoid sin.⁶

Memory Work:

Romans 12:1-3 (NIV)

“Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God – this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.”

Group Questions:

- 1.) Have you ever found yourself struggling to discern the will of God in a situation? What did you do? What was the outcome?
- 2.) What steps can you take to “sharpen your senses” when it comes to listening for and responding to the voice of the Spirit?
- 3.) Does the discipline of Confession play a role in your life? If so can you share how?
- 4.) What stops you from engaging with the Discipline of Confession? How might you overcome those hindrances?
- 5.) Pray for those in the Group who need guidance from God right now for decisions they have to make or difficult situations that they face. Be open to possible promptings from the Spirit and share whatever thoughts or feelings you sense God may be giving you.

Take Home Exercise:

The recommended reading for this unit is *Richard Foster’s Celebration of Discipline*.

⁶ Ibid., p. 190