

- ***READ Romans 12:1,2*** Within this text it becomes abundantly clear that the Apostle Paul expects for God's people to be a people who are different than what might be seen in the average person in this world. Instead of living for self, we are admonished in this text to give our bodies and lives as holy sacrifices before God. We are admonished to not allow ourselves to be made like those who are of the world, but we are to allow God to transform us through the renewing of our minds. We are to allow God and His Spirit to permeate our lives so that we might be changed and conformed to the image not of the world but of His Son Jesus the Christ, our Lord and Savior. **(Romans 8:29)**
- Yet, would we also take note that it is through the renewing of our minds that we then begin to seek out the will of God for us. I really appreciate the Christian Standard Bible's rendering of this verse. ***"Do not be conformed to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may discern what is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God."*** **(Romans 12:2)** The idea found in this verse is quite simple. Part of being transformed is making the change from pursuing our own will and desires and instead seeking and finding that which is the good, pleasing, and perfect will of God. This pursuit stands in stark contrast to the world's plea that we simply do what is pleasing to ourselves. Such a purpose is not to be found within the disciple of Jesus because we have been changed and transformed into one who only seeks to please God.
- But that leaves us with a very important question...How do we practically come to determine what is truly the will of God? If we were to ask this question today then we would certainly receive a number of different answers. Some would say that we ought to simply pray to God and allow Him to give us some sort of direct answer to this question. Others would say that we simply need to do what we think is best. Others would say to go to the Bible, but they might go to the Bible without knowing exactly what it is that they are searching for.
- I'll tell ya...wouldn't it be nice if we had an example of a question being raised that centered around trying to determine what was the will of God on a particular issue? That would be wonderful, and I'm so appreciative to God that He included such an example for us in His divine Word. This past week we read through **Acts 15** for our daily Bible reading, and this chapter contains a perfect blueprint for how we ought to go about the business of determining God's will on any particular issue. Our study this evening will consist of a consideration of this text and what we can learn from it in regards to steps we can take to determine the will of God.

I. The Problem, Process, & Solution Reached

A. Some were teaching that the Gentile converts had to be circumcised in order to be saved. **(Acts 15:1)**

1. Prior to **Acts 10**, the Gospel had only been delivered to those who were Jews. While we don't have everything recorded that was done by the Apostles and the early disciples, best we can tell their efforts were focused in and around Jerusalem which would have had a very dense Jewish population. We can also put this together with Paul's words that are recorded in **Romans 1:16** where he speaks of the Gospel first being given to the Jews and then it was given to the Greeks. This seems to fit well with the timeline and narrative that is recorded in this book of the Acts of the Apostles.
2. It isn't until **Acts 10** that we see a Gentile man and his household being offered the Gospel message. In that chapter we find Cornelius being approached by an angel who told him to send for Peter. At the same time, Peter experiences a vision in which God shows him that those things that were once unholy and unclean had now been cleansed and made clean. It is after this that Cornelius's messenger comes to Peter, and Peter accompanies him to Cornelius's house where he shares with him and his household the Gospel. They are receptive, and news spreads the the Gentiles could now receive the Gospel.
3. While this should have been an overwhelmingly joyous development, the reality is that there were many who resisted such a thing. Many of the Jewish converts couldn't fathom the Gentiles being joined together with them. This was a struggle in many places, and much of the Letter to the Romans deals with this issues. Nonetheless, this issue was spurred on the claims by some Jewish Christians that the Gentiles needed to not only put faith in Jesus, but also conform to the practices of the Law of Moses. This is the problem that arises in **Acts 15:1**, and Paul and Barnabas spearhead the effort to reason with these teachers.

- B. Paul, Barnabas, and others go to Jerusalem to consult with the Apostles and elders of the church. **(Acts 15:2-6)**
1. This great debate originally takes place in Antioch. This city and group of believers was very near and dear and important to Paul in his ministry, so he wanted to be sure that they only stayed within the realm of the truth. Therefore, after going back and forth with these men from Judea, he and Barnabas and some others depart from there and go to Jerusalem so that they might discuss this matter with the Apostles and the elders of the church.
 2. Once they arrive in Jerusalem, they are greeted and received by the church and its leadership. They then begin to detail everything they had experienced with the Gentiles being converted, and it is at this time that those disciples, who had formerly been Pharisees, stood up and claimed that these Gentiles needed to be circumcised and be made to adhere to the Law of Moses. **(Acts 15:5)** This was a serious issue that had come to the attention of the Apostles, elders, and other leaders of the church that existed at this time, in this place, and in this climate. Therefore, they all put their heads together and gave their due diligence in looking into this matter so that they might determine what was truly the will of God.
- C. Peter, Paul, Barnabas, & James share evidence for why the Gentiles shouldn't be troubled by the need for circumcision. **(Acts 15:7-21)**
1. After those present had debated back and forth on the issues, we find Peter, Paul, Barnabas, and James standing up and giving their reasoning as to how this matter ought to be handled. Yet, instead of simply giving their reasons, they shared what they had experienced and come to know from God. Peter begins by going back to what we know takes place in **Acts 10** and reiterates the importance of God allowing His Spirit to come down upon Cornelius and his household as Peter was sharing with them the Gospel message. It is at the point where the Holy Spirit comes upon them that Peter puts two and two together to realize what God was proving to him by such a thing taking place. *"Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?"* **(Acts 10:47)** Peter saw no other logical conclusion than the fact that the Gentiles could now receive the Gospel. In fact, he repeats this conclusion later on in **Acts 11:15-18** as he returns to Jerusalem.
 2. Paul and Barnabas then take their turn and begin to share with those gathered all that they had done in teaching the Gentiles the Gospel. They sought to show that this was God's will and that He approved based upon the fact that He had provided the power of the Holy Spirit. It is in **Acts 13:46** that we see Paul and Barnabas losing patience with the constant rejection of the Jews wherever they went, so they declared that they would now turn to the Gentiles to share the Gospel. This turned the page in their ministry as they now began to seek out the Gentiles who might put their faith in God. From this point on to **Acts 15**, we find Paul performing signs and wonders in Iconium **(Acts 14:1-3)**, healing a lame man in Lystra **(Acts 14:8-10)**, and being delivered from a stoning. **(Acts 14:19,20)** Paul and Barnabas were surely convinced that God approved of their work based upon the power He had given them to perform among the Gentiles in order to confirm their messages.
 3. Finally, we find James standing up and detailing to the hearers how the things they had heard up to this point were simply a fulfillment of what had been expressly foretold in former days. The prophets had already spoken of a time when *"the rest of mankind"* and the Gentiles would be called by His name. **(Acts 15:17; Amos 9:12)** James even emphasizes the fact that this had been made known by God long ago. **(Acts 15:18)** James's conclusion based upon everything that he had heard and what was plainly and directly stated and foretold by God through His prophets was that the Gentiles ought not be troubled any further.
- D. A letter is sent to the church at Antioch telling them to not worry beyond that which was essential. **(Acts 15:22-31)**
1. Based upon all of the evidence that had been provided by these great men of faith, it was decided that a letter would be sent to Antioch by Paul and Barnabas detailing that those Gentiles who were turning to the Gospel ought not be troubled with having to conform to the Law of Moses that the Jews had once lived under. The Apostles and elders desired for the souls and minds of these brethren to be settled and made at peace by their words.

2. And yet there were some admonitions to these brethren that they take care to not get caught up in those things that had been issues in their own pasts. The traditions of the Law of Moses wouldn't have been much for them to worry about day in and day out. However, being Gentiles they would've come from a background where those things mentioned in **Acts 15:29** such as idol worship, consuming blood, and being involved in fornication could've been real stumbling blocks. Therefore, it was the wisdom of the Apostles that led them to emphasize the Gentiles' need to be sure to stay away from those things that might bring them back into the life that they had once been involved in. They didn't need to worry about those things that weren't relevant to them.
3. Upon Paul and Barnabas arriving back in Antioch, the whole church comes together so that the letter might be read. The resulting emotions were ones of joy and encouragement because those that had been bothering them and unsettling their minds had been called down. This allowed them to focus on those things that were pleasing to God without being burdened with those unnecessary matters. The question had put forth, discussed, and answered, and I believe there is much that we can learn from what we have considered together.

II. What We Can Learn

A. We would do well to seek spiritual counsel from those who are older, mature, & experienced.

1. It is important to point out the steps that were taken in order to determine what was truly the will of God. Let's first notice that this problem didn't originally become an issue in Jerusalem. The issue originally took place in Antioch, and it was after Paul and Barnabas had tried to reason with the teachers who were trying to hold the Law of Moses over the Gentiles, that it was determined by the brethren that they would take this debate to the Jerusalem so that the Apostles and elders of the Jerusalem church could weight in.
2. This might seem a little strange to us for a church to look to another church's leadership for guidance on an issue, but we have to understand that the Apostles had special charge over any of the Lord's churches as Jesus's handpicked leaders. Those who were elders of the Jerusalem church would surely have been extremely wise and knowledgeable themselves being around the Apostles all of the time. It is my belief that the church at Antioch simply recognized the invaluable asset of having the Apostles and elders in Jerusalem of whom they could seek their wise council.
3. While we ourselves might not have Apostles to go to in order to seek advice when trying to understand the will of God, we do have elders in this church and I'm sure all of us have people within our lives that have shown themselves to be wise and knowledgeable of God and His Word because of their age and experience. We would do well to imitate Paul, Barnabas, and the church in Antioch by seeking the counsel of those who might be able to give us strong spiritual insight. Of course, this is only an example of a principle that can be found in Scripture. Primarily what comes to my mind is the role that older men and women are to play among God's people that is spoken of in **Titus 2:1-8**. Older men and women are to be as God would have them to be so they might serve as examples and sources of encouragement for those who are younger. Likewise, the younger ought to seek out the advice of those older so that they might have the best chance of truly determining the accurate will of God.

B. God communicates with men through natural modes of communication.

1. We can also take from this text that even those within the first century were able to determine God's will through normal every day modes of communication. We often get fixated on the awesome occurrences of miraculous things throughout the New Testament in which God communicates His will to men. Even tonight we have seen where God communicated to Cornelius and Peter through the means of an angel and a vision. These things amaze us, and we are left maybe a bit disappointed that God doesn't seem to communicate to us in this way during our time. However, just because something is amazing doesn't mean that God cannot accomplish His will in more simplistic ways.

2. I am of the opinion that men as a whole are often turned off by that which is simplistic. We often think that the more complex and complicated an idea or a process is...the more impressive and effective it must be. But in reality...this simply isn't true. Just because something is complex doesn't mean that it is good. Sometimes simpler things are simply better and more effective. I believe this to be true when we look at how the majority of these men approached trying to figure out what God would have them to do with the Gentiles and their coming to faith in Jesus Christ.
 3. We see Peter using some sense to come to a natural and forced conclusion that the Gentiles must be Gospel subjects based upon the fact that they received the Holy Spirit just as the Apostles had done in the beginning. God had given Peter the evidence and he simply came to a conclusion. Paul and Barnabas took a similar approach by reasoning that God approved of them teaching the Gentiles based upon His giving them the ability to perform miracles around them. Then James simply took the Jewish Scriptures and read what God had expressly said concerning the nature of the Gentiles joining the Jews in Jesus. He read nothing of the Gentiles needing to observe the Law, so he concluded it wasn't necessary. These three basic modes of communication, drawing conclusions, giving examples, and direct statements were enough for these to come to their conclusion and they ought to be good enough for us as well.
- C. The Holy Spirit should be trusted to deliver to us the true will of God.**
1. Finally, I'd like to observe that everyone involved in this process leaned upon the Holy Spirit to help them to make sure they knew God's true will. Peter saw the miraculous power of the Spirit at work among Cornelius and his household. Paul and Barnabas themselves experienced the miraculous power of the Holy Spirit as they performed miracles among the Gentiles, but then we have James who doesn't have any sort of miraculous experiences to lean upon.
 2. However, what James does have is inspired Scripture which has certainly been given through the work of the Holy Spirit. We know that all Scripture has been breathed out by God, but Peter further specifies in **II Peter 1:20,21** that it is the Holy Spirit who speaks from God and moves men to write what is contained within our Scriptures. Therefore, it is able to be said by all of those involved in this discussion, *"For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these essentials..." (Acts 15:28)*
 3. From this, I would take away that we ought to be sure that whatever we determine is the will of God has been given to us by the Holy Spirit. No, this doesn't mean that we have to wait for some divine intervention. What I am meaning is that we need to be sure that our belief on any matter can be defended from the inspired text that has been given to us through God and His Spirit. If we cannot logically defend our understanding from what the Holy Spirit has given to us in the Bible then we must ask how it is that we can say that it is from God? If James was convinced of God's will based upon what he was able to read from Scripture then it should be good enough to convince us, as well. We should have the utmost trust and confidence that the Spirit will only lead to know what God would have us to know so that we can be pleasing to Him.

An issue that very well could've torn the early church apart was thankfully considered and addressed in such a way that those in the middle of it were able to hear the decision of the Apostles and elders and rejoice because of the encouragement that it gave them. This text should likewise give us much encouragement and joy because it teaches us that we, too, can come to determine and know the will of God within our own lives. We should be encouraged that knowing God's will doesn't demand that we jump through hoops or do backflips. It doesn't demand that we wait for some miraculous event. It simply demands that we be willing to read His Word and allow the Holy Spirit to guide us in the way we ought to go. Sure some things might be more difficult to understand than others, but I believe that is one reason why God put us in bodies such as this so that the older, wiser, and more mature disciples can help lead the younger disciples along the way. With these things being so, we should always be thankful that the words of **Psalms 143:10** can be real within our own lives. *"Teach me to do Your will, for You are my God; Let Your good Spirit lead me on level ground."*