

How To Discern God's Will

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Hi, I'm Danielle Bean and I'm excited to connect with you today, here in the Pray More Advent Retreat, to talk with you a little bit about how we can discern God's will. How can we train ourselves, practice hearing God's voice, even in the busy-ness of every day? But before we dive into that first, let's begin with a prayer.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, amen. Dear Lord, you tell us that where two or more are gathered in your name, you are there in our midst, so we know that you're here with us today. Help us to listen for your voice, to hear your calling so that we can know that we are open to your will in all that we do. Remind us that you want good things for us and that we have nothing to fear, if we submit ourselves to your holy will. Mother Mary, please guide us on this Advent journey. Hail Mary full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death, amen. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, amen.

I'm really excited that you've joined me here today for this particular topic because this is one that I think we all need to talk about, we all need to think about, we all need to reflect on and remind ourselves of the importance of how we discern God's will, how we can know God's will. I know I need to be reminded time and again, to give up my own will in place of God's will but then we have that tricky concept of, how do we know what it is?

So, let's talk about that. I'm going to share three different points with you here today, to keep in mind when we're trying to discern God's will for our lives. And the first one is it's not as complicated as you think. Oftentimes, we talk about discerning and we turn it into this big process and we kind of make it into a much larger thing in our minds, a more complicated thing in our minds than it really needs to be.

You know, I once had a good friend who was a young woman, ask me how I discerned that I was called to be married. In fact, in particular, how I discerned that I was called to be married to Dan, who's now my husband of 26 years. And at the time I was like, well, you know what? To be honest, I don't think I did a whole lot of discerning. We were just crazy about each other and we couldn't wait to get married and start a family. Like that was just this drive that we had in us. And upon further reflection, I realized that is how God's will work sometimes. He's not going to speak to us often, in from a thunderbolt from the sky, right? Some booming voice from a cloud in the sky.

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As much as we'd love that, as much as we'd love the clarity of that and how simple that would make our lives. But he does speak to us in everyday ways, like through the desires for good things that he places in our hearts, the passion that we have for some vocations, something that we have in mind for our lives, something that we're particularly good at or excited about or passionate about, a person that we're in love with. He speaks to us in those everyday ways and we don't have to get overly complicated and think like, you know, I think back then, of course, I was a cradle Catholic. So, I was living out a life in the sacraments and I had a prayer life. And as long as those things are in place, we don't have to make it more complicated and say, okay, have I spent enough time discerning X, Y, or Z? Oftentimes, God is speaking to us through the people that he places in our lives. The people that God has placed in your life are living, breathing manifestations of his will for you.

So, what does that mean? He wants you to love them. He wants you to love the people he's placed in your life. So, if you're a mom, that'll mean your husband and your kids. If you're a dad, it'll mean your wife and your kids. If you're a single person in the workplace, it'll mean your coworkers and your friends and your extended family. You know, sometimes I think we get all caught up in this idea of discerning God's will, that we make it more complicated than it needs to be.

So, that's the first point I want you to think about and reflect on today. Like, what is God's will for me this Advent season? And how might I be making it more complicated than it needs to be? One of the beautiful gifts of Advent is that it invites us to reflect on that beautiful scene of baby Jesus in the manger. How simple? How every day? How mundane? He's wrapped in swaddling clothes, in a manger, in a dirty cave with animals. This isn't some flashy thing. This is every day and it's mundane. And sometimes, I think we're tempted to reject God's will for us, the calling that he has for us because it seems so mundane because it's not glamorous, it's not some glitzy, you know, flashy thunderbolt moment, where God is calling you to this great thing.

But what we fail to see is that God calls us to greatness inside of those simple things, inside of those small ways, that he calls us to be faithful in loving the people that he places in our lives. And baby Jesus is the perfect example of that. It's not Jesus preaching to us. It's not Jesus saying anything at all. He is showing us the dignity of the everyday of the small things, of the mundane things in your everyday life. And I know I do this sometimes. Like I think about like, "oh, this can't possibly be God's will for me, it's so boring. It's so every day."

And you can even, you know, as a mom, myself, I feel like sometimes all the little details of the things that I attend to in the day, the ways that I'm called to love the people that God places in my life are so boring, they're not glamorous at all and I want something great or that can't possibly be God's will.

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You know, one time, a few years back, I woke my husband up in the middle of the night and I was like, we are meant to be missionaries in Calcutta. And now, my husband knows me, so he just said, no, we're not, go back to sleep. And you know, of course he was right. And the next morning I was thinking about that kind of epiphany that I had in the middle of the night. And I realized I was going through some hard stress at work and we were dealing with a difficult situation with one of our teenagers and I was looking to escape to Calcutta of all places, thinking, this can't possibly be my mission in life. I can't be called to this work. It's too unpleasant. It's too, you know, it's too boring and I want something glamorous. I want something that's going to feel great and it's not always going to feel great.

And I think that's sometimes how we might miss God's will for us because we're looking for something flashy. We're looking for something amazing. And what we fail to see is that the amazing greatness that God calls each of us to is it living out those everyday things with faithfulness and with love. If you want to know what God's will is for you, look around your life, look at the people He's placed in your life, look at the opportunities He's given you. Look at the desires for good things that He's placed in your heart. That is very much how he is speaking to you. So, that's the first point I want you to reflect on is that God's will is probably simpler to discern than you might be thinking. It might be a lot less complicated than you're expecting it to be, a lot less glamorous, perhaps but we've got Jesus's example to show us the greatness that is found in that every day, living out of our vocation. So, that's the first point. It might not be quite as complicated as you think.

All right, the second point that I want to make with regard to being open to and discerning God's will is that, you need to make room for that in your life. You need to have space in your life, where you are connecting with God, where you are praying. Do you have that? Now, I'm really glad that you've taken the time for this retreat. And so, I'm hopeful that this time that we spend here in retreat, the time that you've devoted to participating in this retreat during this Advent season can be the beginning of something new in your life, new spaces. Even if you do have time already set aside for daily prayer, where might God be calling you to closer connection with him? How might he be calling you to spend more time with him?

If you don't already have that daily habit of prayer, I really want you to encourage you to think about some spaces in your life where that could possibly happen. Where could you do that? Where could you find room to connect with God on a daily basis? Because we're all busy but we all do need that basic connection with our creator. We're built for it. You know, God doesn't need us to pray. We need to pray. We need to be connected with God. How are we going to discern God's will, if we never pause and sit in silence with him and listen for his voice?

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If you're wondering what God's will is in your life, do you spend time in quiet prayer? Do you spend time allowing Him to speak to you? Do you ask Him for the gift of knowing what His will is for your life? Because that is a gift. Inspiration from the Holy spirit, do you ask for that? Bring that petition to prayer. God won't fail to answer you, if you ask Him to help you to know and do His will. Now, that's a scary thing sometimes. It can be frightening to be open to God's will because we're wondering how much God's going to ask of us. What it's going to cost us to do what God wills? Do you ever feel this way? It's kind of like a lack of trust that we have in God.

And it goes all the way back to the garden of Eden, where the very first sin ever committed. What was it? It wasn't that Satan was tempting Eve to eat the apple because it was so delicious, right? What did he say to her? He said that God knew that if she ate the apple, that she would become like him, knowing good from evil and that God was keeping that good thing from her. So, that very first temptation towards him was a temptation to not trust in the goodness of God. So, Satan was tempting Eve and she thought, "huh, maybe God doesn't want good things for me. Maybe if I want good things, I need to take them for myself."

That's the temptation behind every sin we might ever commit. And we can attack that temptation, right at its root, inside of our prayer time by being open to what God's will is and training ourselves to trust in God, as scary as that might be sometimes, as hard as it is to pray those words, "thy will be done." Because prayer, sometimes we think of prayer like, I'm going to pray all these things and it's going to change what God's doing in my life. It's going to change God but that's not how prayer works. Prayer changes us. It's meant to, it's meant to change us. It's meant to make us into different people. It's meant to call us into closer communion with God and help us to see the ways in which we can align our will with His because His will is always for our good.

He wants every good thing for us and yet we're the ones who are holding back out of lack of trust, not trusting that God wants good things for us, not trusting in the goodness of God. Thinking instead, "if I want good things, I have to make them happen for myself. I have to grasp. I have to take good things for myself." Well, that's the root of every sin you might ever commit. It was the root in the garden of Eden and it is the root today. And that is the temptation to believe that God doesn't want good things for us and we're afraid of what God's will will cost us.

I know this very personally. Years ago, I had a good friend who tragically lost her infant son to SIDS and it was horrific. And it was such a difficult time, as I was trying to do my best to support my friend, I had my own infant daughter at the time. And I remember during those days just rocking my daughter and thinking I cannot pray those words, "thy will be done" because I had a lot of difficulty in understanding a God that would allow such a tragic, horrific thing to happen, such a painful thing to happen. And sometimes, we are holding back inside of our prayer lives. We hold back from really praying those words, "thy will be done", because we are so

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afraid of what God's will will be, what it will cost us. And yet God, in His goodness, He sees He's outside of time and He sees the way that He wants to work all things together for our good, even if we might suffer. And He's calling on us to trust in Him, to pray those words, "thy will be done."

Our Lady models, this is a beautiful reflection to make during the season of Advent is on Our Lady's, "yes," to God. In that moment at the Annunciation, she could not have known all that lay ahead because she knew scripture though, she probably had an inkling that saying yes to becoming the mother of God was going to cost her in some way, that it wasn't going to be a pain-free kind of commitment. And yet she said, yes, anyway, not knowing all the details. Without knowing how everything was going to work out, she said, yes.

And we're called to do the same thing. She models that beautiful prayer of "let it be done to me, according to your word." Can we pray those words with her? Can we ask Our Lady to help us to pray those words? To give us her heart so that we can truly meet those words, when we pray them? And if you're not there yet, that's okay. Start where you are. Begin where you are, praying the words and praying to mean them, praying for the grace to mean them.

"Thy will be done." Those are the words that Jesus teaches us, when he teaches us to pray, right? When they went to him and said, Lord, teach us to pray. What did he teach them? The Our Father, the Lord's Prayer, "Thy will be done." And then models those words again for us in the garden, the night before his passion and death. He models those words saying, "Lord, take this cup from me, but not my will but your will be done."

And so, I love that our Lord gives us that very human example because it's okay to pray that way. It's okay to say, Lord, take this cup from me. If you're suffering through something difficult, it's very human, it's very normal, it's natural to want to pray those words. Allow yourself to pray those words. Our Lord in his full humanity models that for us, that very real way of asking God, take it away but then following through afterwards saying, but not my will, your will be done. And that's really an important part of discerning God's will, is understanding that God's calling us to embrace it, to trust in Him. There's a lack of trust sometimes, that holds us back from fully being open to and hearing and discerning what God's will might be in our life.

All right, the third point I want to make with regard to discerning God's will in your everyday life is, this is an admonishment, don't bully God, okay? I only know about bullying God because I've done it myself inside of my prayer life. Now, do you do this? Do you bully God with your prayers? Like, go to your prayer time and you got your list, I want you to do this, I want this good thing for this person and then I want this to happen and to have it work out in this way.

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We're very detailed, right? I sometimes go into my prayer time and realize; I am running it like a board meeting. Like, I am telling God how He's going to handle things but that's the wrong way to approach prayer, bullying God with our demands.

You know, I like to think about that story of Mary and Martha. That famous story, right? Where Jesus goes to visit the home of Mary and Martha and Martha is so busy and distracted with the cooking and the pots and pans and serving the guests and she's so annoyed with her sister. And this is what I love. I love that Martha goes to our Lord and she is so sure, so certain that she has right in this situation that she bosses Jesus, right? She says, do you not care?

First of all, yeah. Do you not care that I'm left alone to do the serving, that my sister has left me alone? And then she says to Him, tell her to help me. That's pretty, that's pretty audacious, right? I mean, the fact that she is approaching Jesus our Lord that way. But how many of us do that? And we're so sure that we've got it all figured out, everything that needs to happen, everything that's going to be good for us. We've got all the details figured out and just God make it happen. I'm here to tell you how to do it. That's not how we're supposed to approach prayer.

And I love that our Lord in that moment with Mary and Martha. With Martha, He's so gentle and He's so loving in His response to her, but He corrects her. He says, "Martha, Martha." Can we hear Him saying our name like that? We're meant to place ourselves inside of these gospel stories. Place yourself inside of that story today. Hear our Lord saying your name, two times like that with love but also that gentle correction, that this isn't how we pray. We pray like the example that Mary who's chosen the better part, sitting at the feet of our Lord, open to hearing what He might tell her, open to hearing His will.

So, don't bully God. I get it, I do it. I am subject to that temptation almost every time I go to prayer and it's very human but let's remind ourselves, especially during this Advent season of the value of just sitting with God, choosing that better part and being open to what God might be speaking to you inside of your life today. It's only when we make time for that kind of stillness, that kind of connection with God, that we really can be opened to hearing what God's will is.

And it might never be a booming voice from the sky, it might never be an apparition of Jesus or Mary appearing at your bedside. You know, sometimes I hear those stories of the saints and you know, the great visionaries and I'm jealous because it would be nice, if it was that simple. It would be nice if Jesus was standing right before me here and telling me all that He wills for me, but we do need to be a little more intentional, most of us, inside of making that time for daily prayer, making that time for daily connection with our Lord so that He can speak His will to us. And being open rather than going and bullying God with the things that we figured out are best for us. Be open to hearing what God's will might be for you.

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So, those are my three points. First of all, it's probably a lot simpler than you think, maybe not glamorous but simple. Second of all, that we need to be making that time to connect with our Lord. We need to be listening and open and asking for those inspirations of the Holy Spirit, asking God to speak to us, making that time for daily connection with our Lord, making that time for quiet in our lives. And then third of all, remembering that prayer time is not about bullying God with all that we want Him to do inside of our lives. As tempting as it is, as much as we think we've got it all figured out, truly God knows what is best for us and He's calling us into that deeper relationship with Him. He is calling on us to grow closer to Him, especially, during this Advent season, to grow closer to Him through learning to trust in God, learning to pray those words, "thy will be done" and truly mean them.

I hope something that I've shared here today is helpful to you in your Advent journey. I'm looking forward to continuing this journey with you here in the Pray More Advent Retreat. God bless you and your Advent.