

Discovering the Will of God

by Ray C. Stedman

When we come to this point in the book of Romans, we are ready to talk about commitment. In a way, I approach this subject with trepidation because I feel it can be a very dangerous subject. There is a type of preaching that has a ministry of exhortation, in which Christians are continually being exhorted to commitment – to Christian commitment. Often this ministry is carried on without the minister ever saying *what* we should commit to, or *why*, and, especially, never saying *how*. As a result, there are many Christians who are stirred to the point of commitment and eager to do something for God, but they don't know the first way to go about it. Thus they become what is so frequent in our modern American life – consecrated blunderers. The result is a barrenness in their own ministry. That is why I am afraid of the subject of commitment.

On the other hand, I am aware that there is a danger of having understanding without activity. Activity without understanding results in blundering barrenness, but understanding without activity is equally bad. There is such a thing as knowing without going – a willingness to sort of sit and sour – and understanding without activity is disobedience. So we need to beware of both horns of the dilemma. To err in either direction results in coldness, hardness, complacency, and barrenness in life.

The chapter division between Romans 11 & 12 is rather misleading. The division falls right in the middle of Paul's line of thought, and when you start with Romans 12:1-2 (which is one of the most quoted passages in the New Testament), you miss completely the force of the apostle's argument. It is like going to the grocery store and taking the middle can out of a stack of canned tomatoes – it makes a mess out the whole affair. You cannot

understand this great passage until you tie it with the great doxology with which Paul closes Chapter 11.

Let's start with what we may call **the logic of commitment**:

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable are his ways!

“For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor?”

“Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid?”

For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen. {Rom 11:33-36 RSV}

- This is more than just a hymn of praise and worship about the greatness of God,
- This is more than an expression of the awe and wonder of the apostle's heart at the majesty of God,
- This is primarily an expression of the utter madness of trying to live a life apart from complete divine control.

In this passage we have two basic philosophies of life meeting in a headlong clash:

This last week the world has been watching with bated breath the two greatest powers on earth threatening to meet in a headlong clash in the Caribbean Sea. Everybody has been waiting anxiously to see what the outcome will be. In very much the same way, here in this passage, there comes to-

gether at last two very conflicting and diverse outlooks upon life which meet headlong – and one is completely demolished by the other. Here the common philosophy, “My life is my own to live as I please,” meets headlong with the philosophy, “My life is God’s to do with as he wills.” You can recognize how diverse these two are. We frequently hear the idea reflected in our conversation that man is somehow sufficient unto himself – we don’t need God. That idea comes directly in conflict with the concept of the apostle that man is but a vessel, made to contain God, and is utterly and totally useless without him. Here we see what the outcome is.

The big gun that Paul used to demolish the argument of man is simply to say, “Take a real look at God.”

Look at his *omniscience* first of all; his wisdom and knowledge are such that man doesn’t even remotely approach it. We love to boast about our accomplishments, and we speak in glowing terms of how tremendous it is that we can send our vehicles into space and fling a heavy object up onto the moon. In comparison with what we were doing fifty years ago, of course, this is great – but, in comparison with what God does every single day, it is nothing. We think we have done so much when we finally get a satellite to successfully revolve around the earth, but God does this every night. We look up in the sky and see that he has millions of them, billions of them, uncounted trillions of them, “squillions” of them, revolving around each other – and no one even thinks it is worth applauding. This is the greatness of God! I think it is a healthful exercise to read the 38th through the 41st chapters of Job occasionally. There God summons Job to a little debate on the natural realm – the realm of natural theology – and simply asks him a long, long line of very embarrassing questions about what goes on in the natural world. He sums it up by saying, “Now, Job, can you do these things?” And Job has to admit that he can’t. And then God says, “What right have you to complain about the way I am running things in your life, if you can’t do these things?” It is a very humbling experience to read these chapters in Job. That wonderful passage in Isaiah 40, Verses 10-18, concerning the greatness and majesty of God, and his wisdom and knowledge, far exceeding anything that man ever remotely approached, describes what Paul brings forth here.

Then he says, “Look at God’s *inscrutability*.” This is what theologians today love to call his “wholly otherness” – i.e., his difference from us. Cowper caught it in his well-known poem:

God moves in mysterious ways,
His wonders to perform.
He plants his footsteps in the sea;
He rides above the storm.

We humans can’t comprehend his actions. Who can predict what God is going to do? Who can explain his methods?

We know that there are times (all of us have experienced it) when we have been in the midst of circumstances that have totally baffled us, and we have said that there is no rhyme or reason for this – it makes no sense whatsoever. But, as we have lived it through and look back upon it, we can see that there was a pattern working its way out through all the dark and difficult days – and we see that God’s wisdom was greater than ours. This is what Paul is speaking of; he says that man continually tries to thwart God’s will and to escape his control, but God takes the very plans that are made to defeat him and uses them to accomplish his purpose. How are you going to win with a God like that? He has an unfair advantage in this game of international chess today, and it is only necessary for us to remember that, to have a sense of peace of heart about what is going on.

Actually, man never violates or breaks God’s laws. We think we do, and, sometimes, in our strutting ignorance, we fancy that we can get away with things and that the result will never catch up with us – but it always does. We never break God’s laws – we only illustrate them. If you announce that you are going to break the law of gravity and then step off the top of a twenty-story building, you won’t break it – you’ll just illustrate it. When they dig you out of the pavement, you will have proved that the law of gravity still works.

And when we break (in our fancy) the moral laws of God, we don’t really break them; they are still in action; they still exact their relentless vengeance upon us. The other day I received in the mail an advertisement for a new book on sex. We are getting a lot of literature flooding the mails today, more than ever before, and there is a license that has seized the publishing industry in this respect to publish almost anything on sex. This was advertis-

ing a book entitled, *Sex and the Single Girl*. The author had written a little bit of an introduction to the book which was printed on the advertisement, and she said something like this:

There are many people who feel that a single girl has no sex life at all. Nonsense. The modern single girl can have an unending series of affairs with attractive males, yet without loss of self-respect or independence.

When I read that I thought, “There is the old lie again, as Satan whispered to Adam and Eve in the garden, “Yea, hath God said? ‘Ye shall not die,’ {cf, Gen 3:1-5 KJV}. There won’t be any results like he said would take place, if you do this.” This is exactly the attitude reflected by the writer of this book. She was giving the impression that it is quite possible that all this Victorian nonsense about observing the laws of sex is pure rubbish – it is quite possible to violate them and none of these evil results will follow. But anyone who has sat and listened to those who have lived like this and then come for help in time of trouble knows that, inevitably, the unending series of affairs becomes harder and harder to find. The attractive male becomes whoever-you-can-get, and self-respect turns to disillusionment and self-pity. All too frequently, the end to that kind of living is a bottle of pills and a phone call to the police.

You see, God doesn’t need to throw his thunderbolts at us, or threaten us with brimstone. God’s wisdom and knowledge and character are such that, even when we run against him, and try to thwart what he is doing, quietly, inevitably, and relentlessly the judgment begins to enwrap us, and to entangle us, and we destroy ourselves.

Paul tells us to remember God’s inscrutability and then to look at God’s **inevitability**:

For from him and through him and to him are all things. {Rom 11:36 RSV}

Think of that!

- From him comes all things,
- Through him all things are holding together (as we read in Colossians 1:17), and
- To him all things are trending.

God stands at the beginning and the ending of every path upon which you stand today, and there is no escaping him anywhere. Paul says, “In him we live, and move, and have our being,” {Acts 17:28}. Whether we recognize his presence or not, he is absolutely inevitable.

Someone was telling me last week about Charlotte Bennett, who, as many of you know, lay long in the hospital, suffering greatly. Just recently she confessed to one of her friends, “You know, the thing that has been worst about all this has not been the pain, or the long, unending hours when there seemed to be no release, but the worst thing has been my inability to swallow!” Just a simple thing like that, a thing we take so for granted every day, our ability to swallow! We never dream that it might be taken away – that it is a gift of the grace of God upon us. We are in God’s hands, he is never in our hands, but we are in his hands – for better or for worse.

And, in view of this, Paul is saying that the most logical, the most sensible, the most natural thing in the world is to *present your body to him as a living sacrifice*. Or, to put it in terms of the Ten Commandments, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul, with all thy strength, and with all thy might,” {cf, Deut 6:5 KJV}. What is more natural? All your life is in his hands, everything you are is his to control. How foolish, then, to try to live on any other basis.

Recently there was a poll taken among the university students in Europe to determine their basic approach to life. It was discovered that, by far and away, the most common approach to life was one of simple anxiety – not anxiety about death, but anxiety about life itself.

I remember that during the Billy Graham crusade in San Francisco there was a group of young high school students that went up to the crusade one night, and I rode on the bus with them. At the crusade, a number of them went forward and registered a decision for Christ. On the way back home, one of these young men, a fine-looking football player, was sitting there in the seat by himself, and I slipped into the seat beside him to talk to him. I was talking along the line of what this decision for Christ would now mean in his life, and, among other things, I mentioned that it would mean freedom from the fear of death – that he need not look upon death as a fearsome thing. He stopped me,

looked over at me, and said, “You know, I have never been afraid of death, but there is one thing that I have been afraid of: I have always been afraid that I will waste my life!”

I think a lot of people have that fear – a fear that we are going to waste our lives – and we *will* waste our lives if we live them on any other basis than what Paul now sets forth.

This is the logical, inevitable, natural result of an awareness of what God is like, what he is, and what he does. So, here, in a sense, in Romans 12:1, we have a formula for **how to avoid a wasted life**:

I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. {Rom 12:1 RSV}

The heart of the whole matter is right here. I want you to listen closely to this, because you are not truly committed to God unless these things that Paul speaks of are true in your experience. He says four things about what true commitment is. There is a great deal of misunderstanding about what it means to be committed to God – to be a committed Christian – but here it is made clear:

1. The first thing he says is “present your bodies.” Why bodies?
 - Why not present your spirits? That is the inner part of our being.
 - Why not present your souls? Or,
 - Why doesn’t he ask for what we usually ask for in a commitment service:
 - ⇒ Present your money?
 - ⇒ Or your time?
 - ⇒ Or your life?

No, Paul says, “present your bodies.” I think that it is because man is so made that, when we at last get around to making our bodies available to something, we have given our whole person to that cause. That is what he means.

I frequently hear, as all pastors do, somebody say to me, “Well, I am sorry I can’t make it to the meeting tonight, but I will be with you in spirit.” And I understand what they mean, but I find it rather disconcerting to speak to a hall full of spirits; I would so much rather they bring their bodies. You see, if you move your body into action, you have really given yourself. You can come short of it in a thousand different ways, and sound very pious in doing it, but it is when you finally put your body on the line that you really have given yourself.

Men frequently say, “Well, I’ll give you my time.” Or, “I will give you my money.” But this is oftentimes a very pious dodge to evade a genuine commitment, because it is only part of the life.

Or people say, “I am totally available,” but the first request they get, they find an excuse to beg off.

You see, our minds may be committed, our spirits may be available, but, yet, not our bodies. This is where we resist the pressure of God’s Spirit, but this is what commitment is.

This is why we can publish urgent requests in our bulletin for help in very badly need areas, we can beg for cooperation, we can plead for help from a church which is made up, largely, of “committed” Christians, yet so few respond. I feel very strongly, when I go elsewhere around the country, that we have so many wonderfully “committed” Christians here at this church. Yet, it is interesting that we can ask “committed” people to help and nobody helps – it is because we haven’t given our bodies. James says, “He who is a hearer of the word, and not a doer, deceives himself,” {cf, Jas 1:22}. He doesn’t deceive anyone else, he is only deceiving himself, and his religion is vain – it is empty.

The first test of your commitment to Christ is this: *Is it an active commitment?*

Have you just stood up in a service, and said, “I give myself to God,” or, in your heart, said, “Lord, I am available whenever you want me,” and then have sat back and waited until some special call comes that drives you into a corner where you can’t evade it any longer? The test is:

- When a need occurs before you, and
- You can fill it in some way,
- Are you instantly responsive to do so?

Wasn't that the gist of our Lord's story of the good Samaritan? Here was a man in great need – wounded, bleeding, attacked by robbers.

- First a priest went by and he saw the need, but he said to himself, "I'm sorry. I'd like to help, but I am very busy. I have a special service I have to minister down here in Jericho." And on he went.
- Then a Levite came by, a lawyer. And he said to himself, "I'd like to help, but I have a special case coming up before the Sanhedrin and I can't."
- And then the good Samaritan came, and he saw the need, and that was all that was required. He responded.

That is committing your body!

2. Paul says, secondly, that it is "a living sacrifice." This is, again, a word that is much misunderstood. It simply means that true commitment is perfectly reasonable thing. You see, when we use this word "sacrifice" today, we almost always think of something that we voluntarily give up which we have a perfect right to keep. We feel a sense of satisfaction that we have been so kind to sacrifice something to God.

That concept of the word is utterly foreign to the Bible. The Jews never used it in that sense at all about their sacrifices. When a Jew brought a lamb or a calf as a sacrifice, he was simply bringing what he had no right to keep. He was bringing God's property to God and offering it to him; that is all. The farthest thing from his thoughts was that he had any right to that sacrifice. He had set it apart from the beginning as God's, and he had no right to it at all. It was God's property. Therefore, he could take no credit for doing it, and, on the contrary, he would have been accused of robbing God if he had not brought it.

Now, you see,

- When you genuinely surrender your will to God, and
- When you really mean that you intend to make Jesus Christ Lord of your life, and that
- He is to have access to every part of your life, and that
- He is to have the right to direct any part of your life,
- You are not doing him any favor – this is his right!

I wince when I hear testimonies in Christian services as to how somebody gave up their riches – or their fame, or their love – for Christ's sake, and they assume an attitude of "how lucky God must be now that I am on his side!" It is really quite the other way around – how miserable you would be in your fancied independence and folly! The only life that is really life is:

- A life that is utterly given to God,
- A life in which he is in control, and
- A life in which God rules and reigns!

And, when it calls for a *living* sacrifice, it simply means that this goes on all your life. It is no credit to you. Your life belongs to God and he alone has the right to use it. That is the unquestionable position of Scripture.

3. The third thing that Paul says is that it is "holy and acceptable to God." This simply means that true commitment rests on an awareness that the only life pleasing to God is that of Jesus Christ living in you.

We have already learned, in Romans 5-8, that the flesh cannot please God, and that God's plan of salvation has no provision in it whatsoever for the improvement of the flesh. The only thing that God does with our personal, fleshly efforts is crucify them. That is all. The only life that is acceptable to him is

the life of Jesus Christ lived again in us. As we have seen, God has put all that I am to death – my plans, my programs, my desires – are all tainted with self, and are worthless. *But*, the minute I accept this and acknowledge that it is true and right, *then* it is possible for Christ, who lives in me, to begin to work out his plans, his programs, his ideals, his desires. He does it through my conscious will, but *then* it is something *holy and acceptable unto God*. Anything else is burning false incense, false fire, before God.

4. The fourth thing is what he calls “your spiritual worship,” which means that true commitment is a satisfying thing. Man is made to worship God, and when he does so, truly, he has a sense of fulfillment and joy beyond anything the world knows anything about. There have been times when all of us who know Christ have worshipped him in such a way that we have been lifted up, strengthened beyond measure, made to face disagreeable and difficult circumstances with a new light in our face and a new hope in our heart – this is worship, and we were made to do this kind of thing.

You remember that Jesus said to the woman at the well, “God is a Spirit, and they that worship him must worship him in Spirit and in truth, for the Father seeketh such to worship him,” {John 4:24, 4:23b KJV}.

Worship is really nothing more or less than being what you were made to be, and doing what you were made to do.

- When a flower blooms, it is worshipping God.
- When a bird sings, it is worshipping God.
- When a plant grows, fulfilling its appointed task with its leafy arms outstretched, it is worshipping God.
- When a man, right in the midst of his daily life, right where he lives and where he works, right in the midst of those circumstances is being flooded with God himself, he is worshipping God.

The worship of a Christian isn’t confined to those moments on Sunday morning when he gathers with others at church – that is just our corporate worship – we worship God all day long. When in some small, or even obscure, way we become the visible manifestation of God to someone – then we have worshipped.

A young man was asked what was his favorite book of the Bible. He said, “My favorite book is the *Gospel according to Mother*.” That mother had learned the secret of worship.

Now, you have seen in these verses what true commitment is:

- It is *active*: It is not just sitting around waiting for something. It is at work meeting the needs that are right around at the moment.
- It is *reasonable*: It is doing what is to be expected. It is nothing to your credit at all – quite the opposite – you can be accused of robbing God if you are not truly committed.
- It is *spirit and power*: It isn’t resting upon your ideas, and your plans, and your programs. It isn’t trying to do your best for God. It is resting upon his announced intention to do his best through you.
- It is *satisfying*: It is the most wonderful experience that a man can have. It is fulfilling. It makes you sense, at last, and be, at last, what you were made to be.

Anything less than that is a cheat, and a fraud, and a hypocritical act!

Now let’s look at **the results of commitment**:

Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. {Rom 12:2 RSV}

I like Phillips’ version here:

Don’t let the world around you squeeze you into its own mould, but let God remould

**your minds from within, {Rom 12:2a
J. B. Phillips}**

1. The first result of a genuinely committed heart is *a transformed mind*. Here again you have this headlong clash of two philosophies:

There is the philosophy of the world – self-centered, self-pleasing, indulgent, indifferent to others, dog-eat-dog, devil-take-the-hindmost. That is the world, isn't it? Are you not conscious of the pressure to be squeezed into that mold all around you? Well, if you know Jesus Christ and you have begun to yield to his Lordship, you will be also conscious of another force in your life – re-making your mind from within so that you no longer look at people as you once looked at them, as either obstacles or helps to you. This is the trouble with what sin does to the human perception – it makes us look at another person in terms of a symbol, not as a person. We see them as either “someone who can help us” or “someone who opposes us” – and we resent them or bless them accordingly. But when the mind is transformed by the Spirit of God, you no longer look at people that way. You see a man as a person, even though he has been a crotchety, grouchy, old boss whom you thought was out to make every moment that you lived unpleasant. You begin to see that he is a person with an ulcer, that he has his own problems and troubles, and that he needs help. This is the transforming of the mind.

You begin to see that money and material things are no longer important, as they once seemed to be. The big thing in your life no longer becomes this matter of whether you can close this deal and make so much money, but whether you will do it in a way that honors and glorifies the Lord your God – whether you make money or not. That is a sign of a transformed mind. You no longer take everything that is said to you personally, but you become able to back off and look at it objectively.

I think women have a special problem in this respect. I remember Carl Thomas saying, at a meeting, that it was characteristic of women to take everything personally – even those things that were said in a general way. At the end of the meeting a lady came up to

him, and said, “What do you mean? I don't take these things personally at all!”

The transformation of the mind means that we no longer begin to take everything personally; we see it in its true perspective. This is the work of the Spirit of God, and you find a concern for others beginning to show and to grow in your life. You see more and more how utterly self-centered you've been, and you become concerned that you demonstrate that concern for someone else. This is the transformed mind.

2. The second result is *a discovery of the will of God*. In other words, you begin to experience the conscious guidance of the Spirit of God. You discover that when you have put God in his rightful place and you are willing to do his will, this in itself is the will of God.

There is so much nonsense made about the matter of the will of God in Christian affairs. We think of it as specific directions at a specific time, and we only seek it when we have some big problem to face. But this isn't what the will of God is at all. The *will of God* is *your being willing to do his will*.

As Paul writes to the Thessalonians, “this is the will of God, even your sanctification,” {1 Th 4:3a KJV}. That is, even your willingness to be available to him, this is his will. Once you get to that place, then he is free and able to direct your steps – every one of which is a fulfillment of his will.

3. It is evident that there is *a gradual growth of this awareness*, as Paul sets it forth here. He says you will discover, or prove, “what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God.”

- That is, at first, you will learn that what God sends is *good*. When you begin to see your daily happenings, your experiences, your trials, your joys from this point of view, you begin to see that all these things are designed for your good. You learn not to murmur or complain, and, even though you still, perhaps, have difficulty in seeing how everything is going to work out together for good, you still believe it.

- Then, as you walk on with God, you begin to see that whatever he sends is not only good but *acceptable* – even the trials and the difficulties. You don't enjoy them, but you know that they are good for you – so you walk on, in faith, accepting what God sends.
- But eventually the day comes when you accept God's choice for you as *perfect*. In other words, if you had your own life to live over again, you would choose exactly the same things that came already; you would do it exactly the same way, it was perfect. You begin to rejoice in your sufferings and trials, knowing that they are perfecting the very things that you want to happen in your life, and in God's program.

That is full maturity, and this is what happens when we begin to yield our lives to God.

Now, where does this start? Well, as Paul says, it starts with your body. In other words, bearing these things in mind, begin to get involved in something. Don't be content to just *sit* and *learn*, but begin to *do*. Come to grips with life. Expect the Spirit of God to use you. Be willing to take on something bigger than you are, and *do it in his strength*.

You see, God is saying to you, as he said to Isaiah: "Who will go for us?" {Isa 6:8}. This is what God is saying about the whole world today:

- Who will go into the place where you work?
- Who will go into the neighborhood where you live?
- Who will go into the family circle where you are?
- Who will be **my** representative there?
- Who will be **me** in that place?

Will you say, like Isaiah said, "Lord, here am I. Here am I. Send me!" {cf, Isa 6:8b}.

Prayer:

Our Father, we pray that we will more than just intellectually grasp this truth, but that it may grip our hearts and our souls, and release our paralyzed wills, and energize us to begin to be available to you, not in words but in deeds. In Jesus' name. Amen