

Suppose you are telling someone how to get to your house. Before GPS you guided your friend by landmarks. "Do you know Concord Pike, Route 202? Look for the tallest building on the road. At the next intersection you'll turn left between the 7-11 and St, Mary Magdalena Church." Or: "If you are coming from the north, look for Taco Bell. Two traffic lights south, turn right on to Whitby. Do you remember where the old library used to be?" Even with your GPS device, landmarks can be helpful. Google Maps can tell you to turn the wrong way now and then. The object of good directions is location. The key to good directions is context, context, context.

### **Ephesians 5 in Context**

The object of Bible reading is meaning. The key to Bible reading is context, context, context - two kinds of context. First, what's going on in the world that sheds light on the Bible passage you are reading? Second, what's going on in the chapters and verses around the Bible passage you are reading?

We are going to zero in on Ephesians 5:17: **Therefore, do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is.** What's going on in the world that sheds light on understanding what the Lord's will is? Well, these are confusing times we live in. It would be good to know what God's will is to guide us through the confusion. Is there anything that might help?

I came across something that helped me. Ed Stetzer is the President of Lifeway Research, a kind of think tank within the Southern Baptist publication organization. He has a blog called "The Exchange." A recent posting goes by the title: "The State of the Church in America: Hint: It's not dying."

He was writing about a 2009 religious survey that said the number of people in the U. S. who say they are Christians dropped from 86% in 1990 to 76% in 2009, and the people who claim no religious affiliation rose from 8 to 15% in the same time period. We were living in Portland, OR in 1990, and the idea that 86% of the population was Christian was laughable. Dallas, TX? Maybe, but not Portland, OR of the Pacific Northwest or anywhere else in the American West. Stetzer thinks about a third of the people in the 1990 survey were "cultural Christians." They think, "I'm an American, I must be a Christian."

Stetzer called a second group of people "congregational Christians." These people may have grown up in a congregation, gotten married in church, and occasionally go. However, like the "cultural Christians," they don't practice a vibrant faith in Christ. If "cultural" and "congregational" Christians no longer check the box that says, "Christian," it doesn't mean the Church is dying. It means the social pressure to call yourself a Christian has gone away. It means that the true Church is beginning to shed unnecessary cultural baggage. Let the real Christians stand up!

Stetzer called a third group of people "convictional Christians." "These are the people who would say they have met Jesus. He changed their lives, and since that time their lives have been increasingly oriented around their faith in Him." (ibid) He says the percentage of Americans who are "convictional Christians" "has remained generally stable" since 1972 (ibid).

All of this has a direct bearing on Ephesians 5:17. "Convictional Christians" care about the will of God. They want to know it, understand it, and do it. Nurturing people to be that kind

of Christian is the heart and soul of BVBC. So, "convictional Christians" and "convictional Christian" wannabes are going to be very interested in understanding what the will of the Lord is.

So, what's going on in the world, religious surveys, really does shed light on Ephesians 5:17. So do the chapters and verses around it. That's why I want you to know that the apostle organized Ephesians 4–6 around three governing ideas. First was the unity of the church, second the new attitude and lifestyle of the church, and third was the spiritual warfare of the church.

The new attitude and lifestyle of the church focus on a grand pattern of behavior that stays with us as long as we are in this world. We saw it in Ephesians 4:22-24. First, the apostle said: **Put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires.** Christ's vision of the good life involves renunciations, saying No to anything that pushes you away from Christ and His Church. Then, **be made new in the attitude of your minds.** The key to the new attitude is our motivation for change. We saw that motivation all through Ephesians 4:25-5:7. The final part of the pattern is **to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.** We don't just say No to evil; we also say Yes to Christ and His will for our lives.

I hope you can see the connection between this pattern and understanding what the will of the Lord is. Knowing the will of God, understanding the will of God, and doing the will of God are essential for the new attitude and lifestyle of "convictional Christians."

### Let Your Light Shine

That brings us to Ephesians 5:8-16, the immediate context of verse 17. The first thing you notice in this passage is how different it is from the previous 15 verses. Those 15 verses were painfully specific. Don't lie to each other; there are people depending on you. Don't coddle your anger; you leave an opening for evil to do mischief in your life. Don't steal. Work so that you will have money to help people in need. Learn to talk in a way that builds people up. Stay away from rage and slander and malice. That distresses the Holy Spirit. Instead, imitate the love of God. You saw it in the way Jesus Christ sacrificed himself to serve and forgive people.

Very specific! But now in verse eight: **For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light.** It was Paul's way of saying, "If you live the way we talked about in those previous 15 verses, it will be like shining a light into the darkness of our world." Verses 15-16 makes it clear that he is still talking about their behavior: **Be very careful, then careful how you live – not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil.**

Finally, we come to the verse that matters to us today: **Therefore, do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is.** But now that we are here, we are not starting from scratch. We already have some insight into the Lord's will. We know from our understanding of what's going on in the world that "convictional Christians" and "convictional Christian" wannabes are going to be very interested in understanding what the will of the Lord is. We also know that the will of the Lord is bound up with new behavioral habits and new motives for learning those habits. Verse 17 immediately cautions us that it would be foolish not to understand what the Lord's will is in our evil and confusing days.

It is also obvious that the apostle does not say much about this phrase, "the will of God." That was not his theme. But it is our theme today. So, what is the will of God? Can we know the will of God? Can we do it? Let's get started.

## The Will of God

Let's start with some basics. First, the will of God means that God has definite ideas about how the world should run, and because he is God, it seems enormously important for us to find out what he thinks is important and cooperate with Him. Second, 90% of doing the will of God is showing up every day and fulfilling your responsibilities. There is a world to be run. There are children to rear, jobs to be done, education to be gotten, beauty to be discovered, and praise and thanksgiving to be offered to God. So, when you set off for school or work tomorrow, you can do so in the full assurance that you are about to do the will of God for much of your life. So, do it with all your heart. Doing the will of God is more than that, but it is not less than that.

How much more becomes clear from something Jesus said in John chapter 7:17. **If any one chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God.** People become "convictional Christians," when they choose to do God's will, whether they know what it is already or are trying to discover what it is. It becomes part of who you are. Doing God's will becomes food for the soul.

So much for the basics. Now, let's go deeper. The Lord's Prayer should be in our hearts and on our lips every day. Let's begin with a petition from that prayer. **Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.** That petition has a macro level and a micro level. At the macro level it is a request for God to be at work this confusing, beautiful, maddening, and dangerous world of hours so that some day the world will work the way He wants it to. At the micro level it is a request for God to be at work in your life. It is a request for Him to give you help in maintaining the unity of the Spirit in a bond of peace. It is a request for Him to renew the attitude of your mind and to teach you a lifestyle that glorifies him. It is a request for God to strengthen us for the spiritual warfare we find ourselves in.

All the specific behavior and motives Paul has talked about thus far in Ephesians 4 and 5 express how God's will is to be done on earth right now in your life and in my life as it is in heaven. Doing God's will now in the days of our spiritual warfare anticipates what the world will be like when God's will is done on earth as it is in heaven.

Let's go deeper still. 2 Peter 3:9 says this: **the Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.** When you think about how God wants to run the world, please remember that he does not want anyone to perish, but for everyone to come to repentance.

Doing the will of God means that we have that same desire. That's why we preach the gospel, plant churches, send missionaries, show mercy, and just walk across the room to befriend someone and look for those choice moments we can tell them why Jesus Christ is the Savior.

Let's go deeper still to where there is nothing deeper. Listen to this: **He (Jesus) took Peter, James and John along with him, and he began to be deeply distressed and troubled. "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death," he said to them. "Stay here and keep watch." Going a little farther, he fell to the ground and prayed that if possible the hour might pass from him. "Abba, Father," he said, "everything is possible for you. Take this cup from me. Yet not what I will, but what you will."**

Doing the will of God in this broken world is not always easy. It can work to our disadvantage in this world. It can be very costly. We will not always understand. We will ask "Why?" and all will be dark. God may seem absent. We may be tempted to accuse God of wrongdoing. We may be tempted to give up our faith. Those are moments when we share in the sufferings of Christ. Those are moments when we become like Him in His death. (Philippians 3:10)

Those are moments when we overcome the world, and the Kingdom of God makes its way in the heart of Man.

### Take-aways

Here are some things you can do this week with what you heard today. First, say the Lord's Prayer every day this week. Second, each time you come to the line, **Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven**, stop and think about something you heard today that weaseled its way into your heart. Then, ask yourself, "What am I going to do about that today?" and then do it.

Finally, what shall we aspire to be at Brandywine Valley Baptist Church? Shall we be cultural Christians, congregational Christians, or convictional Christians? By the mercies of God, which have delivered us from this present evil age, I beseech you with all my heart to pursue a vibrant faith in Jesus Christ, which is rooted in the life of His Church. Jesus said, **"My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work."** (4:34) Let the same hunger take over the heart this congregation.

Don't be shy. Don't hang back. Don't stay on the margins of the faith. The time is coming and has in fact already come, when Christ says once again to those who use his name,