

One of the most frightening times in my life was my senior year of college. I knew I wanted to go to graduate school next, but I had no idea where. That was the first moment I truly had to make a life-altering decision on my own. A little background on my life up to that point: God called me into ministry when I was 16, so I went to the Christian college closest to my home. But during my junior year of high school, my church went through one of those ultra-nasty church splits. I watched what it did to people I loved and respected, and I swore I'd never work in a church, even though I had dedicated myself to ministry. So I went to college convinced I was going to be a professor of some kind. My plan all through college was to finish in four years, go get a two-year master's, then a PhD and then teach.

So in my senior year, I was trying to choose a good two-year master's program. And it came down to the University of Missouri or the University of Chicago. I loved both programs and either would've worked great with the path I was on. So I did all the right things - explored the programs, did campus visits, prayed a lot. I kept expecting that God would give me a sign or something. Make it clear which I was going to do.

But nothing happened. Every time I read the Bible or prayed, I just kept not sensing anything. Both campus visits were... fine. I didn't see any big flashing "God's Will" signs or have a miraculous encounter or any of the stuff you hear about when people say they hear from God.

Nothing. For weeks. Months.

Have you ever been in that place? You know you have a decision to make and you desperately want it to be the right one. And you wonder, how do I know? How do I make the right call?

Last week, we saw in Genesis 1 that God has a Way, an order for the world. And if we want our lives to have meaning, if we want our families and friends and careers and hopes and dreams, even our mistakes and failures, to have a purpose, we must order our lives according to God's will, God's plan, God's Way.

But for many of us that's right where we get tripped up. We want to know: what is God's will? How are we supposed to know God's Way? We've been right where I was as a senior, looking into the dark, unknown future, wondering which path we should take.

The good news is that God doesn't want us to be confused. God wants us to see clearly how we are to live, how we are to walk in this world. We get tripped up because we misunderstand what God's will is. We're asking the wrong questions.

We want to know the path our lives are supposed to take. Where am I supposed to go to school? Who am I supposed to marry? What job should I take? Should I move there? Should I switch careers? When should I move?

And it's not just the big stuff. We want to know the right path on the little stuff too. Our work, our relationships. All the rich details that make up our lives. We want to get that stuff right, for it all to matter, to have meaning.

But when we explore the Scriptures, we don't find God answering those kinds of questions for us. We find that the light shines into our lives looks not like a path, but a person. God's Will for our lives is the person of Jesus, the light and word of God.

Talking about Jesus in today's world can be confusing - everyone seems to have a different idea about who he is and what he did. On one end, you've got Christians, who say Jesus is God's son. And on the other end, you've got people who say that Jesus was just a guy, a good teacher. Nice, probably a little hippy-ish, spiritual but got turned into a religion he never would've endorsed.

So when I say, "God's will is for us to be like Jesus," we're all understandably confused and intimidated. How do I be like the son of God? Do I have to learn to fly? Throw lightning bolts? I'm already pretty good at judging and condemning, but maybe I need to damn people some more?

Or should I start wearing robes and walking everywhere? Take up carpentry? Start offering pithy religious statements to people around me?

Obviously not. So... "be like Jesus". What does that mean?

Well, we have to start in the beginning. Last week we talked about Genesis 1 as a process of ordering. We saw that the purpose of Genesis 1 as the beginning of our Scriptures is to affirm for God's people that there is a Way, a logic, an order to God's world. So Genesis 1 begins:

**In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and empty, and darkness covered the deep waters. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters.**

For the Hebrew people, God's creative work didn't stop at the end of Genesis 1. That's how we accidentally think about creation most of the time: that the world is like a machine God set up and now it just sort of runs. God manages it, makes sure everything's running okay, but doesn't get too involved.

That mechanical picture of creation is a worldview that grew out of the Enlightenment. It reflects a religious system called deism where God is distant and uninvolved in the world. And nothing could be further from the Scriptures' presentation of God's creative activity. In the Scriptures, the world is more like a living thing, and God is like the breath that sustains it. In fact, that's what we see in the first chapter of Genesis. God's word, God's breath, God's spirit call forth order from the chaos. God's word shapes reality, gives it meaning and purpose.

When an ancient person was walking outside, they knew the reason that tree grows with its leaves in the air and roots in the ground is because God's Word is shaping it, telling it the Way to grow. The reason water flows downhill, the reason the sun rises in the East, the reason light travels at a certain, constant speed, the reason  $E=MC^2$  is because God is actively, constantly sustaining the world. What we call 'natural laws' an ancient person would've understood to be a reflection of God's divine will.

And what was God's first creative act? Genesis tells us:

Then God said, "Let there be light," and there was light. And God saw that the light was good. Then he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light "day" and the darkness "night." And evening passed and morning came, marking the first day. -- Genesis 1:1-5 (NLT)

God's first creative act is to form light. God's first creative act is illumination. The Jewish people understood this wasn't just talking about the light we use to see. God's light is the light of wisdom, the light of understanding. God gave us light so we could see God's Way.

That's why throughout the Old Testament, the Scriptures are called Light. When God's people received God's Word in the form of the Torah (the first 5 books of our Bible, of which Genesis is the first), they understood that it held God's instructions for them. In fact, that's what Torah means. We usually translate it as "Law", but a better translation is "Way" or "instruction". Drawing on Genesis, an ancient Hebrew songwriter described the Torah as "a light for my feet and a light to guide my path."

The creative, light-shining word we read about in Genesis 1 is the same word God's people received from Moses as the Torah. It's all light that illumines our lives.

God's people understood the Torah to be Law in the same sense as we think of Natural Law. This is the Way, the path, God created people to follow. Just like the world has biological and chemical and physical laws, humans have a spiritual law. A way we were created to live.

The difference between us and plants and water and animals is that we have free will. We can choose to follow our Way or not. And as we saw last week, if we want our lives to be meaningful, we should follow God's Way. This Torah Law. God's Word.

This is why God's people spent so much time studying God's Word, the Torah. Why they memorized it and argued about it. Because they wanted to understand God's Way as deeply, as fully as possible.

What's really cool is that God wasn't finished after we received the Torah, the Scriptures. John picks up this idea of Word in his Gospel. And he begins his story of Jesus in a way anyone who knows Genesis would've recognized:

In the beginning the Word already existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God. He existed in the beginning with God. God created everything through him, and nothing was created except through him. The Word gave life to everything that was created, and his life brought light to everyone. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it. -- John 1:1-5, (NLT)

In the beginning was... light. And this light is the Word of God. The world of God illuminates darkness. This is the part any Jewish person reading John's gospel would already know and agree with. In the beginning, God's Word created everything. When you look around at creation, you discern this Word, this logic, this law. And to follow that Word is light and life. That might be new and cool and interesting to us, but John's original readers that was all given. What got interesting was what John did next, down in v 14.

The Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son. -- John 1:14 (NLT)

We realize that when John is talking about "The Word", he's actually talking about Jesus. John is telling us that Jesus *is* the Word that was there before creation. That Jesus *is* the light of God. And John says that what was truly incredible about this Word, this Light, is what we just celebrated at Christmas: the Word became Human. The Light took on flesh and came to the darkness.

By using "In the beginning" and the light/darkness metaphor, John wants us to see that Jesus becoming human is wrapped up in the Creation story. What God was doing in Genesis 1 and what Jesus did in Palestine 2,000 years ago are intimately connected. And not just back then. John is making a profound, powerful claim about Jesus and what his life means for us, today, here and now.

John said, You know that Word? That Way of God, that divine order our lives should follow? Well God wasn't content just to give us a record of it. God wasn't content just to have Moses write it down and tell us about it. That Word, that creative force, that aspect of God that called everything into being and actively sustains it all all the time, that Word took on flesh and became one of us.

In other words, God wasn't content to tell us about God's Way. God actually became one of us and showed us the Way. When we see Jesus, we see God. But we also see who **we** are most fully supposed to be. We see the most perfect version of humanity possible. Because the creator isn't simply telling us the Way. The Creator became the Way to show us the Way.

When we wonder about God's Will, when we say we can't see the next step, that the path is dark, that we don't know where to go, it's because we miss this.

God's Will for our lives is a Person, not a Path. God is concerned with the *person* we're becoming, not the place we're going. God is concerned with the content of our *character*, not the direction of our decisions.

Jesus, the Word of God, the Light of God, shines into the darkness to illuminate who we are, to transform who we are.

This is a huge paradigm shift. I know that. When we're first confronted by this truth, we want to throw up our hands and say, How does *that* help? I need to know where to go next! I need to see the next steps! How is focusing on my character going to fix that?

I felt that frustration when I was trying to figure out grad school. What path should I take? Which way should I go?

Something else you need to know about me at that time: I was in a senior level class called the Life and Teachings of Christ. I was about chest deep in Jesus for an entire semester. And I loved it. Looooooved it. I had an amazing professor, got to read and write (which is what I like to do for fun) about Jesus.

And the more I studied Jesus, the more I felt a heavy conviction. I know some people say they hear God's voice, but when God "speaks" to me it's never been like that. My experiences of God are a lot

less firm than that - they're indescribable. I just get a heavy sense of something, and I know it's not coming from me. That's how it was during this semester I was learning about Jesus and trying to pick a graduate program.

I got this sense that God was telling me, Look at Jesus. Do you see how he's constantly giving and giving and giving? He's taking all this he's gotten from me and passing it on to everyone around him?

And I thought, Yes, of course I see that. I'm an excellent student.

And God said, Look at your own life. You're like a sponge. You're taking, taking, taking but you don't have any outlets. You're not giving much at all.

And I thought, Uh... maybe I'm not such a good student after all.

So I decided that during the two years I was doing a master's degree, I could serve at a church somewhere. Part-time. I didn't know where. I didn't know what that would look like. I didn't even know if I could find a place that would hire me.

But I knew that if I was really going to be like Jesus, I needed to be giving. I needed to be generous with what God has given me.

That was when I learned something profound about God's will. It's something God revealed to me in my own journey, but I believe it holds true for all of us.

God didn't particularly care *where* I went to grad school. God wasn't overly concerned with the *path* I was going to take.

But God cared a great deal about *who* I was becoming. God was deeply, intimately concerned with the *person* I was becoming.

God doesn't want me to follow a path. God wants me to follow a *person*.

So without any assurances, without any signs or messages from God, I chose to go to Columbia. I ended up at the University of Missouri, and serving as a part-time youth pastor at Parkade Baptist Church. And I remember distinctly about 6 months after I'd moved to Columbia, at the end of my first semester of grad school, I paused in the midst of my life and marveled at how thoroughly I felt I was in the middle of God's will. That I was right where I was supposed to be.

Not because God had sent me a sign. I never got a sign. I just did what I thought Jesus would do, which was seek out a place I could give back. Because God had showed me the Word made flesh. And I knew where my life didn't look like Jesus, how I needed to change to become more like him.

Last week, we talked about the Right Order for our lives. God has a Way, an order our lives must follow if we want that life that is truly life, that overwhelming, excessive *zoe* life Jesus promised us. When we wonder at God's will for us, that's what we're craving. We are constantly looking for a sign, a message. Am I in the right job? Did I choose the right person? Am I raising my kids right? Should I go there or stay here? What's the path? What's the next step?

But God's Way is a person, not a path. God's Word is the person of Jesus. When we look at Jesus, we see God's will for our lives. God became human to shine the light of God's way on our lives. So we can look at Jesus and compare ourselves to determine how we need to grow. If you want to know God's will, get to know Jesus better.

'Am I in the right job?' might be the wrong question. First I should ask if I look like Jesus in my work. And if your job is standing in the way of that, you'll know, and you'll know God's will is to do something else.

Did I choose the right person to be with? is the wrong question. I should be asking how this relationship can help me to look more like Jesus.

What God cares about is your character. When you focus your life on becoming more like Jesus, then you will do God's will wherever you go. You will enact God's will, God's Way in all aspects of your life.

Jesus teaches us the order, the shape our lives should take. So if you want to know God's will, get to know Jesus better.

As far as I can tell, this is the great confusion that keeps us stumbling around in the dark, wondering what God's will is, why God doesn't make it clearer. Because we're looking for a path.

But the first thing God did was shine light into the darkness. And that light is Jesus. That light is a person. What we can now see is our character. And that is more than enough for us to know God's will. For us to know what changes we need to make in our lives.

God's Will is a person, not a path. If you want to know God's will for your life, get to know Jesus better.

If you don't know where to start, start by getting to know Jesus better. Read the four Gospels - Matthew, Mark, Luke and John over and over. A few verses a day, a few chapters a day, it doesn't matter how quickly you work through them. Just read them. Then read them again. Then read them again. Get to know Jesus better and better.

Because if you want to know God's will, you need to get to know Jesus better.

We are closing our time together today with an examine. This is an opportunity for you to honestly evaluate your life in the Light of God. To compare your character to the Word of God.

### **Examine**

1. How has my life looked like Jesus' life in the past week?
2. How has my life not looked like Jesus' life in the past week?
3. What can I do to know Jesus better this week?
4. What opportunities will I have this week to follow Jesus' example?