

Alpha 6: How Does God Guide Us?

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This morning we will not have a typical Easter message focusing on the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Over 2000 years ago Jesus Christ was crucified on a cross and buried in a tomb for three days. On the morning of the third day, he rose from the dead and conquered death for all of us. Because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we are here today. We know that his resurrection provides proof there is life after death. We know that because of his resurrection we have hope in every situation that appears to be at a dead end. His resurrection power offers hope of “new beginnings” in our lives. His resurrection power can overcome any obstacle we face in life. We know that nothing is impossible for God. I want you to know what I believe about the resurrection. It is central to the Christian faith. I love to preach about the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

So why am I not preaching about it today? We started a new class in our church about 7 weeks ago called Alpha. The class tackles core questions about the Christian faith each week. My message each week deals with one of those questions. We have discussed “Who is Jesus?”, “Why Did Jesus Die?”, “Why and How Should I Pray?” The question this week is: “How does God guide us?”

In his letter to the Colossians, the Apostle Paul writes that he prays regularly for them to know God’s will.

Colossians 1:9-10

For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you and asking God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding. ¹⁰And we pray this in order that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God...

Sometimes I think we try to make the Christian life too complicated. We think that to be a mature Christian we need to become Bible scholars, pray using flowery language and practice strenuous spiritual disciplines. We think there are secrets we must discover in order to grow in Christ. Jesus said: “I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 18:3) Children keep it simple. Children have a simple faith. Children simply love. The Christian life is a paradox—there is so much to learn about God and the Bible. We will never exhaust our quest for knowledge of God. But at the same time it is so simple. Someone asked Karl Barth, a brilliant German theologian, what was the greatest theological truth he had discovered. He replied without hesitation: “Jesus loves me this I know for the Bible tells me so.”

When Jesus walked on this earth, the religious leaders had made spiritual life very complicated. For instance, they had 39 categories of work that were forbidden on the Sabbath—the day set aside for rest and worship. There could be no preparation of food, no harvesting of crops, no carrying of water, and no discussion of future work. There were so many rules to keep that people were overwhelmed. Keeping the Sabbath had become a burden. One of the religious leaders asked Jesus, “What is the most important commandment?”

Matthew 22:37-40

Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’³⁸This is the first and greatest commandment. ³⁹And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’⁴⁰All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

Jesus made it simple: “Love God. Love your neighbor.” That is the game plan for the Christian life. Jesus makes a very important assumption behind those two commandments. He assumes that we have experienced God’s love first. Why do we love God? Because he first loved us. Our love for him is in response to his love. We do not love him in order to get him to love us. He loves us first, and we respond to his love. Jesus said, “A new commandment I give you that you love one another as I have loved you.” We cannot love God or neighbor until we have first received God's love. Keep it simple. Let God love you, love him in return and love your neighbor as yourself.

Besides making the Christian life complicated, we have a way of making it unrealistic. We expect our path to Christian maturity to follow a straight path up to the goal of becoming like Jesus. It would look something like this graph. We start out at the point where we receive Jesus Christ as our personal Savior and Lord. Then we expect to make progress toward the goal every day. Each day I will be more of what I should be and less of what I used to be. I will have more of God and less of me.

That is so unrealistic. When we read the lives of people in the Bible and the biographies of the saints, we discover that spiritual growth is not neat and linear. It is messy and inconsistent. It looks like this graph. Our spiritual map resembles a teenager learning to drive a stick shift for the first time. There are lurching starts, and the engine dies, and we roll backwards on a hill. We make New Year's resolutions to go to church, read the Bible through in a year and pray every day. We make progress for a little while, and then we are out of town and miss church for six weeks and find ourselves out of the habit. It is hard to start again. We read the Bible and make it to Leviticus or Numbers and give up. We stop praying, and God seems far away. We may have an experience where we get disillusioned with God or disappointed with the church, and we just quit.

Last fall we focused on Impossible Dreams of joining with God in his work of redeeming and restoring the world. I encouraged us to get out of our comfort zones and engage in ministry to the poor and marginalized people in our community and world. Many of you went down to Mahon Library and engaged in ministry to the homeless persons. Some of you raised money to buy mosquito nets to prevent malaria in a foreign country. Others sponsored children through Metro Ministries in NYC and through the Compassion Child program. Every week we provide meals for over 500 students through our Change for Children ministry. Random acts of kindness like giving a brown bag lunch to a person on the street or purchasing a meal for someone who cannot afford to eat have flowed from the members of this congregation. Every week in staff meeting I ask for updates on the Impossible Dreams being lived out in our congregation. For months there has been great energy in sharing what we have heard and experienced. Then in a recent staff meeting I asked the question, and there was a long pause. The momentum had waned a little bit. Then someone shared a Dream, and the energy flowed again. That is the way it is in our spiritual growth, we ebb and flow. We go up and we go down. It is real life.

Mike Yaconelli put it this way in his book Messy Spirituality.

My life is a mess. After forty-five years of trying to follow Jesus, I keep losing him in the crowded busyness of my life. I know Jesus is there, somewhere, but it's difficult to make him out in the haze of everyday life. For as long as I can remember, I have wanted to be a godly person. Yet when I look at the yesterdays of my life, what I see, mostly, is a broken, irregular path littered with mistakes and failure...I want desperately to know God better. (Mike Yaconelli, Messy Spirituality, page 18)

Sometimes we feel close to God; sometimes far away. Jesus makes it clear that God accepts messy people, imperfect people, people who know they have not arrived. People who know they need his grace and forgiveness.

How does God guide us through the mess and crowdedness of real life? How do we discover God's will for our lives? Knowing God's will and living in it enables us to discover our purpose in life. Paul prayed this prayer for the Colossians: "that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God..."

How do we live a life that is worthy of the Lord and that pleases him in every way? How do we know what to do? Is there some magic formula or secret to discovering God's will?

There are some who believe that God has no specific will for our lives. He put us here and then says, "Do what you want to do." For these persons God is not engaged in their daily lives. On the other extreme are people who believe God has a plan for every detail of their lives: what they are going to have for breakfast, where they are going to park their car and whether they should buy a blue dress or a red dress.

I think the truth is somewhere in between God has a "big-picture" plan for our lives. Jesus said it: Love God and love your neighbor. Anything that will help you do those things is consistent with God's will for your life. Anything that interferes with loving God and your neighbor is not God's will. Keep it simple.

A football coach has a big picture goal for his team: to score more points than the other team. Each week he develops a game plan. The team practices to implement the plan. But when the game starts, each player on the field has to determine during each play what they need to do to contribute to the goal. God has a goal: for us to become like Jesus. He has a game plan: love God and love your neighbor. When the game begins each day, it is up to us to determine what contributes to the goal. It is not by self-effort that we become like Jesus. The process of spiritual growth is the work of the Holy Spirit within us. Our part in the game plan is to do those things which open us to God's transforming power. Sometime we will choose things that close us off to his Spirit and interfere with reaching the goal. We fumble the ball. By his grace, God picks up the ball, hands it to us, and we stay in the game.

There are times in the game when the coach sees something developing. He shouts out very specific instructions to the players from the sideline and tells them what to do. He gets very engaged. There are times when the Holy Spirit sees something developing in our lives, and he whispers to us very specific instructions. On most days, God let us choose where we are going to have lunch. He wants us to discover ways to contribute to the game plan wherever we are. He wants us to treat the people who serve us with courtesy and respect and generosity. Christians should be extravagant tippers. We know that our choice for lunch will be a place that has healthy food that will contribute to honoring our bodies as the temple of God. We know that means we will not choose a place that only has food fried in trans fat. Most days we know the game plan, and we make choices as to how to contribute to the plan.

Sometimes when we are thinking about where to have lunch we feel a nudging to go to a particular place. We do not know why. When we get there, we realize we have a divine appointment with someone. We are sent there to care for a person who has a need—the

Holy Spirit has called us to love a specific person. It is so important for us to listen to the coach and follow his instructions.

Before every play most quarterbacks look over at the sidelines at the head coach expecting him to call the next play. Sometimes the coach points a finger and signals the quarterback, “You call the next play.” The coach knows in this situation that run or pass—either one will contribute to the goal at this point in the game. There are times when we go to God and ask him to make the call. Should I go to college A or college B? Should I accept job offer A or B? God is silent. He signals that it is OK for us to make the call. Whether we choose A or B, either one will contribute to his goal for our lives.

Sometimes the coach calls the play and when the quarterback gets up to the line of scrimmage, he does not like what he sees and changes the play. Sometimes it is a disaster because his call did not fit the game plan. God reveals the game plan to us. Sometimes we call a play that does not fit the plan. We do what we want to do rather than what God wants us to do. A young lady comes into my office, she is thinking about marrying a guy but she is not sure. He is a really great guy, but he is not a Christian. “I really think after we get married he will give his life to Christ.” She is calling a play that does not fit the game plan. God has made it clear in his word that his game plan is for believers to marry other believers. A marriage will face tremendous struggles if the person we marry does not share the same commitment to the most important thing in our lives. God wants to spare us a lot of grief by telling us the game plan: believers need to marry other believers. Sometimes we choose to ignore the game plan and call our own plays. The results are disastrous.

If you are wrestling with a decision and you don’t know what is consistent with the game plan—pray. If you don’t get a clear response from that still small inner voice or from the principles of scripture, then make a decision and ask God to confirm or overrule the decision. Ask him to open doors or close doors.

Scott Peck, the author of The Road Less Traveled said, “If you pray and wrestle with doing God’s will and make a decision, you will do the right thing. You just won’t have the luxury of knowing it at the moment.” If the desire of your heart is to follow the game plan of loving God and loving your neighbor, you will discover God’s will even if you take a few detours along the way.

Keep it simple. Aim for the goal: to become like Jesus. Follow the game plan: love God and love our neighbor. Are you wrestling with a decision today? Are you facing a problem and need God’s help? Let’s pray and ask God to help.