

Sermon 67: Romans 8:14: Led by the Spirit

OUTLINE

What Paul does mean

What Paul does not mean

INTRODUCTION

What are the top three most abused verses in the Bible? 1. 'Don't judge,' (Matt.7:1) this word of Christ to hypocritical religionists is used to try and get Christians to stop talking about sin. 2. 'Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me,' (Rev. 3:20). This verse has been used in evangelism to promote decisional regeneration when in fact Jesus is talking to Christians not to unbelievers. The third most abused verse would be the verse we are considering today, Romans 8:14, 'For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.' This verse has been used to justify a mysticism in Christianity where every Christian is encouraged to find God's individual wills for their lives by discerning an inner still small voice that every Christian can tune into. That is a sickly and weak form of Christianity that we have a name for, 'felt-led poisoning.' It describes those who live their lives by intuition and feeling, feeling led to this, feeling led to do that, following a never quite voice to help them make every decision for them.

There is a general misunderstanding of discerning God's will in Christianity today, and this verse is a casualty of that misunderstanding. This escalates in certain situations to where people put their feelings above clear commands in scripture. Some people don't feel the need to be baptised though the Bible commands it, some don't feel the need to make their marriages work, some don't feel that it is time to give up a certain sin and so God's commands are rejected and feeling is the new boss. This results in the Holy Spirit being made to contradict Himself for He says one thing in the word but they feel that He is saying another thing in their hearts. The truth is the Holy Spirit never contradicts Himself and they have mistaken feeling for the Spirit.

Another terrible side effect of this sickness is analysis paralysis. Many Christians are waiting to hear a word from God to get married, find a job, settle down in a church and many other decisions. There is a general indecisiveness that has afflicted evangelicalism as a mysticism has created a pseudo-spirituality that says those who aren't following a little voice around aren't very spiritual. They say the truly spiritual ones are the ones who feel that everything they do is because God has somehow told them to, they don't use a book, the bible to get instruction, they go straight to the source. What a mystical load of rubbish!

So as we explore this wonderful verse we will look at what Paul did mean and what he didn't mean, as well as explore how we know the will of God and are led by the Spirit in our daily lives.

What Paul does mean

The first rule for understanding any verse is read it in context. Is Paul in the context talking about hearing an inner voice that tells us what to do or something else? Paul in the context is talking about why Christians are no longer condemned and can have assurance. Jesus has done for us what we could not do for ourselves²⁻³, and we have the Spirit who has set us free from sin enabling holiness, and who is the guarantee of the resurrection we will one day receive. In v13, the verse before this one Paul has been telling us that we are typified by a life of putting sin to death in our lives and ended the verse saying that those whose lives are characterised in that way 'will live'. V14 is brought in to further confirm and give evidence to why we will live. 'For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.' The word 'For' indicates that this verse is concluding what was said just before linking it to the context. The words 'led by the Spirit' are employed as another way of saying, 'by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body'. And the verse ends with the first mention of our new adopted status 'are sons of God.' So summarizing, Paul is saying that those who are led by the Spirit to kill sin, it is they who can know they have salvation because they are the sons of God. They are not made sons by holiness but revealed to be sons by holiness. So then being led by the Spirit has nothing to do in this context with listening to a voice but living according to the Spirit in holiness, and in particular in mortifying sin. Do you see any mention of listening to an inner voice in the context?

The second rule for understanding any verse is look for other places in scripture, preferably by the same author where they talk in the same way about the issue you are exploring. So in order to confirm this reading we go to Galatians 5:18, I will read the whole context so you can hear the verse in context and when Paul mentions being led by the Spirit you can tell me whether he means hearing an inner voice or being holy, 'But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. 17 For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. 18 But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law. 19 Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, 20 idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, 21 envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. 22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law. 24 And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. 26 Let us not become conceited, provoking one another, envying one another.' Being led by the Spirit means being in conformity to the Spirit's will of holiness for us and being submitted to it.

Now every Christian is led by the Spirit when they walk in the Spirit and not in the flesh, when they deny the flesh and do the will of the Spirit. When you say no to sin you are led by the Spirit, not when you make mundane decisions like should I have tea or coffee with my breakfast led by an inner voice. This being led by the Spirit is not for the super saints

who have trained their inner ears, but every believer, if they are a true believer if they are saying no to the flesh and yes to the Spirit, are led by the Spirit.

When you respond to the conviction of the Holy Spirit to stop sinning and repent, when you pray for God to help you put a certain stubborn sin to death, when you turn away from a situation you know will weaken your resolve, when you nurture your hatred for sin and your delight in God's will, this is all being led by the Spirit. Do not be intimidated by the apparent super spirituality of someone who goes around saying, 'God told me....' 'I felt led to....' Don't feel inferior, don't be manipulated, this is a false notion of God's leading. And especially don't let anyone control you with what God is telling them about what you should do with your life, God is capable of letting you know what He wants you to do. Sadly, many Christians have been manipulated by this mysticism of others and think it is spiritual to force their feelings on others, it isn't.

Paul's point in this verse is to assure you of your salvation, if you are led by the Spirit to kill sin, you are adopted by God and called a son of God. You are legally part of the family and entitled to all the benefits and inheritance of the family estate. Are you in the army of sin killers? Then you are a child of God.

What Paul does not mean

We see in this verse that Paul is not encouraging us to live an intuition based introspective mystical life, but how do we know God's will? In preparation for this message I bought an audio book written by Kevin Deyoung, the title is, *Just do Something: A Liberating Approach to Finding God's Will, Or, How to make a Decision without Dreams, Visions, Fleeces, Impressions, Open Doors, Random Bible Verses, Casting Lots, Liver Shivers, Writing in the Sky, etc.* I am borrowing liberally from his discussion on this topic

God's will is used in three ways. Firstly, the Bible talk about God's decretive will, that is His big plan that incorporates everything into it. The will of God as it is used in verses like Ephesians 1:11, 'In him we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to the purpose of him who works all things according to the counsel of his will.' God like any good architect or builder does not randomly start creating and see where it heads, it was all planned out in eternity past and God is using His power to make His plan A happen. This will includes the details of every single one of our lives and includes everything that ever happens. This will is hidden to us and never fully disclosed apart from some big headlines like the Second Coming. This will cannot be overthrown or disobeyed. Secondly, there is God's revealed will, in other words His commands. God has revealed in many places His will for how we are to live our lives, e.g. the Ten Commandments. This will is not hidden but is revealed and it can be disobeyed. These are the only types of will that the Bible talks about but we talk about a third kind, an individual personal will that can be discerned by inner voices, visions, prophecies, and other crystal ball future revealing means. It is our obsession with the third type of will that has led to endless trouble in Christianity.

We are to live trusting in will 1 that God has a perfect plan and everything that happens in it is for the good of those who love Him and His glory. Trust implies that we do not need to know the future but who holds the future and can put our confidence in Him without having to have any other information. We are to live obeying will 2, the express commands of God. Holiness is His will for our lives and the Spirit has been given to enable us to be holy. We are not to do nothing while we try and find out our own individual futures. Our obsession with our own futures is a type of superstition. We may not consult gypsies, tarot cards, tea leaves and horoscopes but we have the same desire to be able to control our own destinies. God has not called you to know the future, if He wanted you to know the future He would have given you that ability. Instead He wants you to let Him be God and be faithful and trusting in a holy life as He works out His purposes.

There are many sins that need to be exposed in this type of attempt at divination.

Firstly, when we pretend that God wants us to find out His will we imply that He is sneaky and delights to frustrate us, holding things just out of our grasp. We imply that God has not given us a bible that is sufficient to equip us for every good work but we need to add to the bible our own prophecies and words.

Secondly, we major on minors. We lose our way in seeking God's will because we get bogged down with non-moral decisions. We fear that if we fly on the wrong airline, buy the wrong brand of clothing, a wrong colour car, or many other things that are not moral issues, that we will miss God's will for our lives. God is not so weak that these decision can frustrate His omnipotent hand bringing to pass His perfect will.

Thirdly, we make God out to be untrustworthy. He can't be trusted with the future, we need to know so that we can control it better. This form of doubt is sinful, for God is by nature trustworthy and we cannot deny who He is without sinning.

Fourthly, we are cowards and full of fear. We want to know the future so that we can ensure that nothing bad happens to us but sometimes God intends for us to be in dangerous situations so that He can show His power and you can learn courage. Think of Esther who had to risk her life to save her people, she did not agonise over whether she was doing God's will but did the right thing no matter the cost.

Fifth we are avoiding accountability by putting all the weight of our decision making on God not ourselves. This fear of failure and a failure to take responsibility is assign of immaturity, decisiveness is a mark of maturity.

Sixthly, we institutionalize passivity as a virtue. We talk about God not giving us the green light and sit on our hands as a form of obedience.

Seventhly, we enslave ourselves to subjectivism. God expects humanity to live by reason not by emotion; by principle not by feeling. Too many Christians are enslaved to a false notion that Christianity is a mystical religion that leaves your brain at the door. This is detrimental to the truth a good tactic of satan if I ever saw one. This is ultimately putting ourselves in the place of God's authority, our feelings in the place of His word. God tell us to be renewed and discover His will by the renewing of our minds not through intuiting our futures.

There are various false ways of being led that we need to address as we seek to lay out positively what God requires of us.

Firstly, we need to appreciate that what happened in the book of Acts is not the pattern for every believer's life. In the book of Acts we see many visions taking place, we see dreams, trances, even personal prophecies (in the case of Paul). But one must realise that although the book of Acts is regularly punctuated with the miraculous it is a very condensed account and the miraculous was not the normative means of knowing God's will, even in the life of the apostles. Just listen to how Paul ends 1 Corinthians in 16:1-12, here you will hear Paul taking many decisions and organising many things by sanctified common sense, 'Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. 2 On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come. 3 And when I arrive, I will send those whom you accredit by letter to carry your gift to Jerusalem. 4 If it seems advisable that I should go also, they will accompany me. I will visit you after passing through Macedonia, for I intend to pass through Macedonia, 6 and perhaps I will stay with you or even spend the winter, so that you may help me on my journey, wherever I go. 7 For I do not want to see you now just in passing. I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits. 8 But I will stay in Ephesus until Pentecost, 9 for a wide door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many adversaries. When Timothy comes, see that you put him at ease among you, for he is doing the work of the Lord, as I am. 11 So let no one despise him. Help him on his way in peace, that he may return to me, for I am expecting him with the brothers. Now concerning our brother Apollos, I strongly urged him to visit you with the other brothers, but it was not at all his will to come now. He will come when he has opportunity.' Waiting for a voice for every decision out of fear that one might miss God is not what we see in Scripture, rather Paul making good choices for God glorifying reasons, and if God wants to redirect his path by appearing to him in a vision that is God's extraordinary way of working not an everyday affair.

We need to realise that although God gives extraordinary provision in dire circumstances, this is not the usual way of operating. God wants us as His children to mature into people who can discern His will through the constant exercising of our discernment. God does not want children who have to constantly be told what to do at every turn but rather seeks to develop our characters so that we love what He loves and hate what He hates that we would choose what He would choose and so that He can reward us for our initiative, industry, ingenuity and effort.

There are two other ways of seeking God's will that should be put to bed. Firstly, the use of fleeces is not a recommended practice. When Gideon put out three fleeces in the book of Judges he is not an example to us of what to do. The book of Judges is a time when everyone did what was right in his own eyes and one should not stupidly vow and keep their vows like Jephthah either. We must not test God, we are in a much better position than Gideon in that we have many bibles, books, mature Christians and other resources at our finger tips when Gideon was surrounded by Baal worship. We must follow Christ's example that refused to presume upon God's grace and get God to prove Himself to us. Secondly,

don't play biblical roulette, that is the practice of opening the bible and taking a verse out of context to speak to your situation. There was a young man who couldn't decide whether he should date Joy or Alice so he opened his bible and it opened to the verse, 'you shall go out with joy.' Scripture is not a freaky book that has a personal message for each one of you. The verses of Scripture must be taken in context. One can apply the principles of scripture to one's situation but we cannot rip them up out of their contexts and apply them to ourselves. People who have lost children have wrongly applied verses on resurrection as a promise to dead their dead loved one, barren women have clung to verses describing the fruit of the ground, George Whitfield believed that his son would be the next John the Baptist who would herald the second coming of Christ, all from verses personalized and not interpreted in their original contexts.

How then are we led by the Spirit and know God's will?

Here is a four step program.

Step 1 study the scriptures. If you are wondering what the will of God is with regards to marriage, study and see that you can only marry a Christian, someone who is committed to the same things you are spiritually. If you are going to the mission field make sure you choose someone who will support you in this. As a rule when it comes to this don't make lists and keep them as laws saying to yourself I will never marry anyone who Many of our prerequisites are silly and uninformed.

Step 2 seek the wisdom of friends who know you and mature Christians. Friends can see what you can't and if you can't see that a woman is a bad fit because you are blinded by attraction others might. Let others tell you, 'You aren't finished high school yet you can't get married.' Take what others say seriously and be teachable testing all things by the word. Ask your parents advice and see what God says through the wisdom He has put in others.

Step 3 pray. Pray for God glorifying motives, pray trusting that God will direct your paths, pray for wisdom not a knowledge of the future.

Step 4 decide. You have seen it is not a sin, others think it is a good idea, and you have asked God to show you your sins and give you wisdom, now it is time to act and make the most God glorifying decision you can make. Make a godly choice and God is honoured. There may have been several women you could have married but with prayer and sanctified common sense you chose a particular one. You have not missed God's perfect will, there is no such thing as only one person that is right for you, or one path that you could take to honour God. There are many and we need to man up and move, men especially need to stop mucking around in indecision and lead.

If you are guided by the principles of Scripture, trusting in God in prayer and are seeking to make the best decision you can without actually knowing the future, you are being led by the Spirit so trust that God will lead you into the plan He has for you. Your only responsibility is faithfulness not a perfect knowledge of God's hidden plan.