

Today I want to talk to you about “Knowing and doing the will of God”.

For some things in life, it’s really clear what God wants us to do: Like, “What does He want us to do with His son?” Well obviously He wants us to believe **in** His Son, and to submit **to** His Son, **completely**, as our Lord.

The New Testament speaks **unreservedly**ⁱ about the master/slave relationship when it comes to the relationship between Jesus and His disciples. Now, that’s not a very popular message today, and a lot of “**so-called**” Christians, totally ignore it. Some preachers refuse to teach it because it’s not a message that’s attractive any more (well the fact is, it never was). **Nobody** wants to be somebody’s slave – we all want to be our **own** masterⁱⁱ, and there is the essence of sin (I want to be my own master, where as Jesus' claim as “Lord” means **He** is my master).

And to those who reject the demands of obedience to Christ, not only are they continuing in their sin, to them Scriptures like today’s reading would be a complete and utter non-sense (with Paul and Silas obediently following God here and there... Why would they???)

I’ll tell you why – it’s because Jesus is **Lord**. It doesn’t matter what we say or what **we** do, Jesus **is** Lord. The only choice before us is, “When I yield to the Lord Jesus Christ to be saved:

- is it a matter of empty words;
- is it a mind game (just believing a few facts);
- or is it something that’s for real? Is it actually true, that Jesus has total authority over me, and that He expects my obedient submission???”

Because the teachings of Jesus and the teachings of the apostlesⁱⁱⁱ make it very clear, that without total surrender to the Lordship of Christ, there **is** no salvation – there’s not even a **starting** point^{iv}. And any “so-called” gospel that says there is, is not the gospel at all. There is no easy-believism^v when it comes to Jesus. Jesus demands that we forsake **everything**, to follow Him. The cost is high. Jesus described it as the treasure in the field that you would sell up everything to go and buy. It’s the costly pearl, that when found, you would give up everything to obtain it...

So, what God wants us to do with His son – well there’s nothing cryptic about it – it’s very clear. Believe in Him, **and** obey Him (forsaking everything else). And unless we **get** this, then this book of Acts doesn’t make sense. And the reading today certainly doesn’t make any sense...

Another matter that’s a clear no-brainer, is how would God have us **behave**... In love – and in obedience to His word. And some of you might say “But Michael, that’s legalism – we’re saved by grace – we don’t have to follow God’s commandments any more...” Really? Because you’re saved by grace, you don’t believe you have to follow God’s commandments???? Well, that might be what the theology of some **men** says, but it’s certainly not what’s taught in the Scriptures. Psalm 111 says:

*⁷ The works of his hands are faithful and just;
all his precepts (commandments) are trustworthy;
⁸ they are established forever and ever,
to be performed with faithfulness and
uprightness.*

Forever’s a long time... How long is “forever and ever”?

And Jesus said: **Matthew 5:19** **Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.** If you want to be great in the Kingdom of Heaven, you'd better start teaching people to obey God's commandments.

I think that's pretty clear – and one has to do a fair bit of duplicitous twisting of the scriptures, to make this say anything other than what it very clearly says.

And so, in some things, God's will is really obvious (we just have to read the Bible and we know it).

But in other areas, it's **not** so obvious.

- “The moisture is marginal, Lord, should I plant the crop or not?”
- “The cattle prices are really high. Should I be buying them now, or are the prices going to go down?”
- “I'm so busy running after the kids... Should they be involved in less activities?”
- “Should I send my kids to the State School; or St Pats; or to boarding school; or should I home school them?”
- “Who do you want me to marry?”
- “What of my future Lord? Where do you want me to live? When should I retire? Where should I retire?”

And so, in some areas it's **not** obvious what God wants us to do. And so sometimes we're left to:

- prayer

- acting in faith
- wisdom
- discernment

But I guess my advice is, “It all begins with handing it over to God”. If Jesus is Lord, your possessions are not your possessions – they are His possessions. If Jesus is Lord, your children are not your children – they are His children. If Jesus is Lord, your future is not your future – it is His future. Your burdens are not your burdens – they are His burdens.

And when we realise that Jesus is Lord, maybe we realise that we’re worrying about the wrong things. Everything you have, and are responsible for, belongs to Jesus, and so every major decision you make, will be a Kingdom of God decision.

- And so the decisions about cropping and stock are more, “Lord, how would you have me use these things for the building of Your Kingdom?”
- Lord, my children are your children. Help me to direct them to activities that will glorify you, and help them to learn to make you Lord.
- Lord, in my children’s education, may they believe in You, and may they be little evangelists for your Kingdom (wherever they are)...
- Lord, yoke me with another believer – But whether I be married, or whether I be single, may you be Master of my home.
- Lord, how and where would you have me serve you in retirement? In which part of the world, will I be most beneficial for your kingdom???

Do you see the difference? Even so, we pray, act in faith, wisdom, discernment – watching to see what God is doing, and when we see God at work, we join Him....

Today we're specifically talking about "Seeking God's will in mission".

- What **is** God's will?
- **How** would He have me serve Him?
- **Where** would He have me serve?
- To **whom** does He want me to share the Gospel?
- What **partner** does He want me to be in ministry with?

And I'm going to do things a bit back to front, and we're going to begin with the punchline:

The Lord very rarely lays out a full plan for us in one hit. I suppose if He did, we'd probably go off, guns blazing, trying to do it in our own strength, and maybe skipping steps.

He rarely gives us the full picture:

- Sometimes we're left wondering
- Sometimes we have to 'feel our way'
- Sometimes He **will** give us a clear direction (but only up to a point)

- And so never should we nail down **our** plans – we must always be open to redirection from the Lord.

- And never will our walk with the Lord, be characterised by 'inactivity'

So let's set the scene:

Paul and Barnabas have completed their first missionary journey, they've headed off to Jerusalem and sorted out a

theological controversy; And that's what we studied last week. The topic was "Free from the Law, but not free to do whatever we like", because in our freedom we have responsibilities. We are to exercise our freedom, adhering to the principals of:

- repentance
- holiness
- and love for our brother.

Interestingly, the presenting issue was "circumcision". Paul travelled all the way to Jerusalem, to argue that it's not necessary to be circumcised to become a Christian. But now, in **today's** reading, as a practical demonstration of having love for our brother in the way we **exercise** of our freedom, Paul circumcises Timothy. Timothy was free **not** to be circumcised. But Timothy was also free to **be** circumcised, and he was, so that the Jews he was going to minister to, would not be offended....

So, they come back from Jerusalem to Antioch, ^{15:36} **And after some days Paul said to Barnabas, "Let us return and visit the brothers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord, and see how they are."**

Alright, so up on the screen, is a map of their first missionary journey, and that's where they were planning to go.... There's no mention made of any specific direction from God – they just knew it was the right thing to do – to go and continue on ministering where they'd left off. Alright, inactivity wasn't an option for them.

But as they planned to head off, Paul and Barnabas had a sharp disagreement. Barnabas wanted to take his cousin (John/Mark) along with them. But Paul wouldn't have a bar of it – John/Mark didn't have a good track record (as far as he was concerned). He'd had started out with them on the previous missionary trip, and once the Mediterranean cruise part of it was over, he said "Right'o, I'm heading home." In fairness, we're not told the reasons **why** he went home, but we **do** know that Paul didn't want to risk taking him again, and Barnabas wanted to give him another chance. And the bible doesn't try to gloss over it – it was a sharp disagreement – so sharp in fact, that they parted company.

Now I can tell you from experience^{vi} – these things happen in the church, where people disagree on the direction God wants them to go. And when we read this account, we don't know who was right and who was wrong. Because either God didn't give them direction, or one of them wasn't listening. – We don't know (we're not told)... But there was a painful parting. Paul and Barnabas were a great team. They'd started off together. They'd gone out on mission together. They were planning the next step of their ministry together... And they split. It wasn't even a theological disagreement. (on the surface, it was a pragmatic issue) But the Lord took them both on in service (just in a different team). Their team split up, but God joined them up with another team.

In the long run, this is the last mention we have of Barnabas in Acts – he just drops out, but it seems that later in life, Paul came to appreciate John/Mark in his ministry^{vii}. And so maybe teaming up with Barnabas, was just the opportunity that John/Mark needed... We don't know....

So they split directions. Barnabas and John/Mark head off on another Mediterranean cruise (that's probably not fair – I don't think there was anything cushy about sailing in those days) – But Barnabas and John/Mark begin at the beginning of the previous mission trip (clockwise) (by sailing to Cyprus), and Paul teams up with **Silas**, and **they** begin at the **end** of the prior mission trip (anti-clockwise) (they go to Derbe).

Once again, we're not told anything about any specific direction from God. And it almost appears as if they're just **feeling** their way.... In the absence of a clear direction from God, they're doing what they believe is best... And from this point on, we follow Paul's journey, and we don't hear another word of Barnabas or John/Mark.

Now, do you remember Lystra? On their previous mission trip, Lystra was the place where they thought Paul and Barnabas were Gods and they tried to sacrifice a bullock to them. And when they realised what was going on, they went: "No! No! No!!! We're not gods – we're just men..." "Oh, OK, we'll stone you then"... And they stoned Paul (that's a quick version).

Anyway, so they return to Lystra, and there was a young-fella there, well thought of by the Christians of the region, whose name was "Timothy" (And Yes, this is the same Timothy we have a couple of letters written to in our bibles). And Paul wanted to take this young Timothy along them on the remainder of their trip. And so he circumcised Timothy, and away they went.

You know, stories like this get me wondering... I wonder if there's a "Timothy" here – someone who's earned the respect

and the admiration of the other Christians – someone who, although they're really valuable to the local church, their calling is to go **out** on mission, or to go to Bible college and become a pastor or a teacher...

How will we know? We're not really told here, but somehow Paul knew... And one of the indicators was "he was well spoken of" by the local brothers... It's a tough call for a church to send someone out to serve the wider church (because they'll really be missed). But the local church are the only ones who will really know if someone's suitable... *As one mission organisation put it, "If you won't miss them, we don't want them."*

So maybe it's up to us, to recognise if there's a "Timothy" in our midst – someone who needs to be encouraged to be trained and to go into the wider mission field.

Right'o, so the journey continues. **V⁶ And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia.**

That's interesting – they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach in Asia. We're not told how the Holy Spirit forbade them. We're not told why... But they must've been sure of it... because the one thing we **can** learn, is they obeyed. They were forbidden, and so they didn't do it. And so they changed their direction. What began as a mission to strengthen and encourage the fledgling churches they'd planted on their first trip, took a turn. They had to give up

their plans, and go a different way, because God had other ideas for them.

V⁷ And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them.

There it is again. What's going on? They're sort of feeling their way, maybe they've got a bit of a general plan of where they're going to go, but the Holy Spirit and the Spirit of Jesus won't let them... So what did they do this time??? They obeyed. They changed their direction again.

And when they got to Troaz, **finally** the Lord gave them some specific direction. **V⁹** And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." **¹⁰** And when Paul had seen the vision, **immediately** we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

Finally, the Lord had given them some clear direction. What did they do? They obeyed.

From Troas, they sailed to Samothrace, and then on to Neapolis, and then on to Philippi, which is described as a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony.

What did they do then? Well, once again, we're not told about any clear direction from God – he'd just said "Go to

Macedonia”, so they went to the leading city in the district of Macedonia... And in the absence of further orders, they went back to their original evangelism plan – On the Sabbath, they went in search of a place of prayer. And they met up with a bunch of women by the river.

So The Lord didn't give them the big picture:

- Sometimes they were left wondering
- Sometimes they had to ‘feel their way’
- And then the Lord gave them a clear direction – head to Macedonia.

- And at each stage, they obeyed. They were willing to throw their plans out the window, and they were open to new orders from the Lord.
- But then once again, even once they've had this one, big direction change, they had to continue to ‘feel their way’ – they continued to share the Gospel, in the way they best new how.

- And never was their walk with the Lord, characterised by ‘inactivity’

What about us? How are we following God, in mission?

- How would He have me serve Him?
- **Where** would He have me serve?
- Are you a “Timothy” who the Lord is calling to full time Christian service?
- **Who** is the Lord wanting you to share the Gospel with?
- Who is the Lord wanting you to team up with, in ministry?

Don't get discouraged if you're finding you're having to "feel your way".

Don't give up if you've started out in one direction, and now it seems that The Lord's wanting to change the direction you've headed...

If there's one thing we should learn from today's reading, it's the readiness, to throw **our** plans out the window when the Lord gives us a **re-direction**...

And never give up.

Continue seeking God. Continue **servng** God. In all areas of your life.

Do you know what really encourages me, about today's reading??? – Even though none of these disciples had the big picture – even though a couple of times, the Lord had to change their direction, the Lord **did** have the big picture. And provided these disciples were willing to be guided by the Lord, and obey Him, God was glorified...

We can see that while they were encouraging the new churches, V5 says that they:

were strengthened in the faith, and they increased in numbers daily.

We can see it in their new mission to Macedonia: a woman named Lydia became a Christian, and was baptised along with her whole household.

God knows what He's doing. God does the work. And as we obediently follow our Master's leading, the Lord is glorified. God is good...

Questions.

ⁱ John 15:13–15 (ESV)

13 Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵ No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.

Some would say this is something that takes away the slave/master relationship. But look at its context.

A slave does what he is told, right?

But we're friends of Jesus because we're no longer his slaves right?

Wrong.

We are His friends because we obey and because He shares his purpose.

We are his friends **because** we are obedient slaves. **¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you.**

When we obey Christ, we are honoured slaves, because He's given us the big picture – His redemptive plan – **all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you**

This is what slaveship looks like: God in human form, submitted to God.

Philippians 2:2-11 (ESV) ² complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶ who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷ but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant (slave), being born in the likeness of men. ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. ⁹ Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

How arrogant are we humans to suggest that because we're forgiven and received grace, we're elevated to a position where Jesus is no longer "Lord" (in the true sense of the word).

ⁱⁱ There is a new 'gospel', which began to be preached in the United States evangelical circles some 20-odd years ago, and it's been spreading its insidious tentacles throughout non-discerning churches ever since. It's a new teaching – only about 20-30 years old, which has

earned the tag of “easy-believism” or “non-lordship salvation” theology. It wrongly claims the practical demands of submitting to the Lordship of Christ is a works-based theology.

iii Everywhere we see the word “Lord” Kurios, that is the master of the slave. **1 Corinthians 1:**

² To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:

iv Luke 14:25–33 (ESV) **The Cost of Discipleship**

²⁵ Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, ²⁶ “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. ²⁷ Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. ²⁸ For which of you, desiring to build a tower, does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete it? ²⁹ Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, ³⁰ saying, ‘This man began to build and was not able to finish.’ ³¹ Or what king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? ³² And if not, while the other is yet a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. ³³ So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.

v **Matthew 11:** ³⁰ “For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” Continues on to show what this looks like. He still puts us in a yoke. But we are yoked to Christ, who pulls with us when we do the good that we are commanded. It goes on to show that the old man-made burdens are lifted (Lord of the Sabbath),

The Pharisees completely misunderstood Him. Jesus said: **Matthew 12:** ⁷ “And if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless.

It was a collision of two systems. They had perverted God’s Law to a system that they thought kept them clean, but they missed the whole point. They were filthy on the inside because they stuck to their “theology” instead of doing the good deeds God would have them do. In this same section, Jesus is asked “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?” Because they wanted to trip Him up. And Jesus said ^{Matthew 12:12} “Of how much more value is a man than a sheep! So it is lawful to **do** good on the Sabbath.”

vi As you probably know, I’ve experienced this in my walk with God. A couple of years ago, I strongly believed (and continue to believe) that God was telling our church to leave the denomination we were in. And in the spirit of the honesty that we’ve just read in Acts, I’m not going to try and hide it – The elders and I were in a sharp disagreement over it. But all I could do, was to be obedient to the order that I believe that God had given. And so I left. And over time, the Lord continued to guide, until we’re at the place that we’re at now (where Bush Disciples is a new ministry that has begun).

And even now, there are those in our old church who are cranky, that we've done what we've done. And on the flip side of that, I continue to be concerned for congregation we've left behind and the lack of integrity of the denomination it's bound to... I'm not going to try and gloss over it – that'd just be a lie... There's still divisions...

^{vii} Col 4:10, 2 Tim 4:11, 1 Peter 5:12