



HOW TO DISCERN  
*God's Will*  
FOR YOUR  
LIFE

WORD  
on FIRE

BISHOP ROBERT BARRON

# HOW TO DISCERN *God's Will* FOR YOUR LIFE

BY BISHOP ROBERT BARRON

As a priest, and now a bishop, I hear often from many people searching for God's direction in their lives. They wonder, what does God want me to do with my life? How can I be faithful to God in my day to day decisions? How can I hear God and be sensitive to his promptings?

We all ask these questions. They are a normal part of the Christian life. That's why Brandon Vogt and I recently devoted a whole episode of our podcast, "The Word on Fire Show," to exploring these questions.

Below you'll find an edited transcript of the show so you can read it slowly, at your own pace, and reflect on how God is leading you in your life.

In the end, all discernment boils down to one ultimate goal: finding the path of greatest love. Let's seek that path together.

Peace,

+ Robert Barron

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**QUESTION:** Many people, of all ages, wonder, “What does God want me to do with my life?” So today, let’s focus on that question—how to discern God’s will in all of its various stages, in the big moments of life but also in the small daily circumstances. Let’s start with the biggest discernment question: how do I discern my vocation, my state in life? Whether we’re called to marriage or the religious life, what advice would you give to someone discerning his or her state of life?

**BISHOP BARRON:** Well it’s a huge question and there are so many ways to get at it. Think of Saint Ignatius of Loyola. The whole point of the spiritual exercises is exactly that. How do you determine your status, your state, your vocation in life? Broadly speaking, what God wants for you is the path of greatest love. God is love. Love is the whole point of the spiritual life. Read someone like St. John of the Cross or Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange or any of these great spiritual masters and they’ll say it all finally comes down to the cultivation of love. So what is love? Love

is willing the good of the other. It's not a sentiment or a feeling—don't fuss with that so much. Sentiments and feelings have their role but don't let them distract you. Simply saying, "I don't feel right about this" or "This doesn't feel like the right path," is too superficial. To love is an act of the will, willing the good of the other. So what makes that love more prominent in your life? What makes it easier in your life to love? What path will open up the greatest capacity for love? That's what God wants you to do.

Now to get a little more specific, look at some of the great patterns within the Bible. I think the Bible is absolutely key to this question. Watch how people in the Bible find their path. Is there somebody in the Bible that you identify with? Somebody who walked a path like yours? Somebody who underwent a conversion like yours? Whether it's Moses or David, whether it's Isaiah or Jeremiah—what are the patterns that unfold in these Biblical figures and can you find any points of contact?

Now to get a little more specific in daily life: How do I discern moment to moment the path of love? Here, I go back to someone like St. Thérèse of Lisieux, the Little Flower, and her “little way.” What’s the demand of love in the present moment? Don’t focus so much on the grand question, but rather on how to live day to day. Every moment the opportunity for love opens up. At every moment I have a choice: I can either will my own good or the good of the other. What do you do? You choose the path of love. Is that easy? No. It’s the Little Way, but that doesn’t mean it’s the easy way. “Little” means it’s the little things in life that matter, not the grand projects and plans. It means rolling up your sleeves and saying, “OK, right now what should I do?” Well ask yourself the simple follow-up question: “What is the path of greatest love?” And that’s what you should do. That’s what God wants you to do.

Now we’ll get a little more specific about how to discern that but those are some indications, more generally, about God’s will for your life.

**QUESTION:** You served for several years as Rector of Mundelein Seminary. You helped hundreds of young men discern whether God was calling them to the priesthood. What would you say to a young person who came to you and said, “I’m not sure if God’s calling me to the priesthood or the religious life but I want to figure that out. Where do I begin?”

**BISHOP BARRON:** At first, I would offer all those general remarks I just made. The primary task here is to discern the greatest path of love for you. After that, I would return to the Bible. Do you read the Bible every day? Is the Bible part of your ordinary rhythm? Do you read the Bible carefully, prayerfully, and with the help of a good commentary? The Bible is one of the tools the Church has always recommended for determining what God wants.

Secondly do you go to Mass every day? If you don’t, you should. Go to Mass every day, and in the course of the Mass keep prayerfully before your mind this question: “Lord, what do you

want me to do?” You would be surprised how often during the Mass answers begin to emerge whether it’s from the readings, the homily, the prayers of the Mass, or just language of the Mass.

Of course, one thing I do as a priest everyday is pray the Office. That’s another thing I would recommend. In fact, this morning I was in my chapel praying the Office (one of the great joys of my life as a bishop now is I have a chapel in my house.) I spend a good hour every morning with the liturgy of the hours, that beautiful prayer largely based on the book of Psalms. With the Office, every morning you find yourself working your way through the Bible or better yet, letting the Bible wash over you. So those are the core practices I would recommend: Scripture, Mass, and daily prayerful meditation on the Bible.

I’d also recommend, of course, a spiritual director. I agree with Teresa of Avila: “If you’re doing a retreat by yourself, most likely the devil is your director.” There’s something really wise about having another mind, or voice, or set of eyes look-

ing at your life with you. So find a good spiritual director. When a young guy comes up to me and says, “I’m considering the priesthood,” that’s almost always my first question: “Do you have a spiritual director? Is there someone you can be talking to?”

I would also say frequent the sacraments, especially the Eucharist and Confession. Are you going to the sacraments on a regular basis? Because you can’t discern God’s will unless the divine life is in you. You can’t have the divine life without the sacraments.

Those are sort of the classic, standard means the Church recommends. And the general idea is that the Holy Spirit is not a distant force. The Holy Spirit is alive in the Church, the mystical body of Jesus, which is filled up with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the lifeblood of the Church, and so we trust the Church has wisdom, insight, and understanding. Enter into the Church in all of its dynamics and you’ll find answers.

Here's another tip I often recommend. Read Galatians 5, which concerns the fruits of the Holy Spirit—love, joy, peace, understanding, etc. Go through Galatians 5 and look at these fruits. Then ask yourself what path is producing in you more of these fruits. That's the path God wants you to walk.

One final consideration: what makes your life more joyful? I recall when I was discerning the priesthood, I kept asking myself, what thing is giving me the most joy? And I don't mean a superficial kind of giddiness like going to a baseball game and getting excited when your home team wins. What gives you an abiding sense of peace and joy? And for me stubbornly, consistently, even in spite of my attempts to run in another direction, the answer was always the priesthood. That idea filled me with such a sense of peace and purpose that I recognized the great joy of my life as a priest. So go over the fruits of the Holy Spirit in Galatians 5 and look for those signs while you contemplate the religious life.

**QUESTION:** What advice would you give people who are struggling with the paralysis of fear? They are trying to figure out what God wants them to do but are afraid they'll make the wrong decision and the rest of their life will be off course. How do you handle that sort of fear?

**BISHOP BARRON:** Perfect love casts out all fear, so when you surrender to God you say, "Lord, I want what you want." Make that your prayer of faith and trust: "Lord, I want what you want, so guide me." And he will guide you. By this prayer, cast away the fear that it's just your project, and you have to figure it all out by yourself, and if you get it wrong you're doomed. No, it's God's project when you say "Lord I want what you want." That's not a bad prayer to say at the start of each day: "I want what you want." I often do that in front of the Blessed Sacrament here in my chapel.

What I pray now a lot, honestly, is: "Lord, make me a good bishop. You made me a bishop—to my infinite surprise! —so make me a good one, because I'm here to cooperate, I want what you want." So again make

that your prayer, and the Lord won't let you down.

Here's a second observation: we constantly resist God's grace. It happens all the time. It's called sin. But what does God do? He reshuffles the deck and proposes something new to us. There's the famous cliché, "God writes straight with crooked lines." It may be corny, but it's true. Even as we reject his grace and move the other way, he reroutes us.

I've used the image before of my *Waze* GPS app, which gives traffic directions. When you make a wrong turn or, in my case, when I think I know better and choose to ignore the directions (which I've learned never benefits me) the *Waze* voice doesn't scold me or upbraid me. Instead, it simply recognizes I made a wrong choice and immediately shows me how to get on the right track again. To me that's a great image of the grace of God. We are making wrong turns all the time. It's that stubborn thing in all of us where we say, "Lord, I've heard your voice in Scripture, in the liturgy, in the sacraments, in the counsel of my spiritual director and confession. I've heard your voice; I know it's the right way... but no, no, no I'm going to

make this wrong turn.” God allows us to make this mistake, reshuffles the deck and finds us a way to get back on the right track.

So part of casting away fear is learning to trust the voice of God, which comes to us in a hundred different ways every day. Learn to trust him and the fear will subside.

**QUESTION:** I imagine a lot of people reading this are already settled in their vocation. They’re already married or they’re a religious brother or sister, so the question of “what’s my state in life?” isn’t as pressing as this one: how do I discern God’s will moment-by-moment, day-by-day in ordinary life? Some spiritual masters suggest we need to always be in close conversation with God. I think of people like Brother Lawrence in his great little book, *The Practice of the Presence of God*. He explains that whether he’s washing dishes or working around the monastery, every moment he’s talking with God. On the other hand, others depict God as a good father who gives us the responsibility of making our own de-

cisions and figure things out on our own. What's the balance here? How do we discern what God wants us to do with each moment of our day?

**BISHOP BARRON:** Well, first of all I think those two things you're mentioning are not mutually exclusive, because of the way God exists in a non-competitive transcendence. It's not as though we have two competitive wills battling each other on the same plane. So for instance, if we are arguing and you want your way and I want my way, then one has got to give. But it's precisely not that way with God, as I've argued—probably *ad nauseam*—in my writings. We're not two wills competing on the same plane, but rather we can say with the prophet Isaiah, “Lord, it is you who have accomplished all that I have done.” That's a wonderful articulation of the Biblical idea—Lord, you've accomplished it, but I've done it!

Thomas Aquinas says that God delights in drawing us into his causality, meaning we can participate in what God wants to accomplish. We get all the joy and pride and legitimate sense of

self that comes from this participation, and God delights in that. He's not competing with our individual wills.

Go back to the story of the burning bush in Exodus 3. We are like the bush in that the closer God gets, the more beautiful and luminous we become. We are not consumed or devoured by God's presence; we become radiant by it.

So those two options—God as the almighty Father overseeing my choices, and God as Holy Spirit working through my choices—actually dovetail. I become much more myself in the measure I surrender to God.

Having made that general remark, go back to the Little Way of St. Thérèse. How do I determine the path of love day-to-day, and moment-by-moment? Well, how about right now? Here we are recording this discussion. We could both be about some other business. We could both be pursuing some particular desire, but we have discerned that this is a path of love. Creating this

podcast episode so people can learn more about the spiritual life is “to will the good of others.” And by saying this, I’m not trying to aggrandize our egos. It’s just to show how simple the answer is: for us, this is the path of love right now. Yes, we could be doing some other things that are also loving instead, but don’t worry about that. Just focus on that simple question: am I finding right now a rich path of love?

On an even smaller scale, just a few minutes ago I came downstairs and greeted my secretary, Sofie, with a friendly smile and hello, and told her a little bit about the Confirmation I presided over last night. Dramatic? By no means, yet in its own very small way, it’s a path of love—willing the good of somebody else. In these really simple ways we can do God’s will. I suppose I could have been cold or stand-off-ish and just gone in and made my breakfast and ignored Sofie. That’s the path of sin, and we walk it all the time. But I, even if subconsciously, chose the path of love.

Moment by moment, how do you will the good of

the other? Let's say you're in your room and you're depressed. You're having a bad day and you're mad at everybody. You can stay in that mood and stew and brood over it, or you could write a note to that person who you know is struggling. You could pick up the phone and call the person you know is in the hospital. You could go visit that person you know feels lonely right now. What's the path of love? What's the path of love? What's the path of love? That's the question that should be echoing in your mind all the time.

Look, we all get depressed and angry and bored. But find the simplest act of love and I guarantee you'll get better. I don't mean that all your problems will be solved. What I mean is by that simple act, you'll be in a better frame of mind, heart, and spirit.

You might even consider making a list of things that you could do that would involve willing the good of another. This way you'll always have something you could do, say, write, or perform that would actually accomplish some good for

somebody else. When you're feeling down pick something from the list to do!

**QUESTION:** What role do our circumstances play in discerning God's will for us? I'm thinking of an example from a few weeks ago at a conference. A young man came up to you in the book signing line and you said something like, "Tell me little bit about yourself." The young man went on to explain how he was in college, double-majoring in philosophy and theology. And you looked at him quizzically and asked bluntly, "Why haven't you discerned the priesthood?" As I consider the impact that conversation may have had on him, I wonder how God uses our circumstances to place people in our lives to help us discern His will.

**BISHOP BARRON:** Yes, an excellent way to think about all of life is that it's not just about discerning God's will for *my* life. Rather, it is good to consider that everyone around us is trying to discern their calling as well. Everyone is on the same basic journey of discovering what God wants. So it's good to ask yourself, how can I play

a role in helping someone else discover his or her vocation?

Moreover, how am I looking at the world? If I look at the world as this arena where the divine providence is at work all the time then I get plugged in spiritually, and I start thinking instinctually along those lines. So for example you ask yourself, “Why did God send this person to me right now? How come he’s here in this moment with me?” Now of course we can over-dramatize all that, but I think there’s something really right in the intuition.

I remember in *Moby Dick* when Captain Ahab says, “Five thousand years before the seas rolled, this scene was acted out by thee and by me.” Now that’s sort of a Calvinist predestination thing, but there’s something right in the intuition that somehow God in his everlasting providence has determined that you and I would be having this conversation right now. How come? What is he up to? What does he want from thee and from me?

When you bring God into the conversation, life gets so much more interesting. It's not just, "Here we are doing our thing and there's economic and political and psychological implications." More intriguingly, what are the sacred implications? For instance, this past Friday after the Confirmations, I had a whole day to myself, which is rare. So I watched the first season of the show *Vikings*, which I know you and a lot of people at Word on Fire like. I had never seen it. Will my new knowledge of this show bring about some connection with someone? I don't know—maybe. Why did God permit me to watch this show at length? That's part of the fun of it, wondering what he is up to.

Thomas Aquinas writes that God is in all things by essence, presence, and power. The old *Baltimore Catechism* asks the question, "Where is God?" And the correct answer is everywhere. When you let that sink in, everything changes. Before, you may think, where's God? And you may answer, "I don't know. He's way up there somewhere as

some distant metaphysical principle.” No, no, no. He’s everywhere! Everywhere right now, even between thee and me, there’s God. So what’s he up to? God is never dumbly there. He’s always there with his infinite intelligence and will. And what does he want? Let’s discern that together.

Remember that great scene in the story of St. Scholastica, the sister of St. Benedict? She was down visiting him and they spent the whole night in spiritual conversation. I always loved that image, because what else would you want to talk about? What’s more compelling or interesting than discerning together what God is up to? Walking your path, whatever it may be, with a keen sense that God is fully present and active—that’s the best way to live your life.

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