

Teaching Us To Think (Part Three): Proving God's Will

Living Righteously With Christ
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Many of us know what a proving ground is. You have probably heard the term in the past, but it is a civilian or military facility for testing new technologies or tactics. For more than a century, the U. S. Army has used Aberdeen Proving Grounds in Maryland to test new technologies that have created the most lethal, adaptive, and competent land force in history, obviously the U. S. Army. Aberdeen Proving Ground was founded during World War One as war technologies were really going into high gear, and they were commissioned to test new munitions, field artillery weapons, ammunition, trench mortars, air defense guns, and railway artillery. After that war, its purpose shifted a little bit to research and development, conducting developmental testing of powders, projectiles, and bombs, and the study of interior and exterior ballistics. So at that time it was still concentrating on munitions.

But the proving grounds expanded both in workers and acreage during World War Two. The automotive and armor-testing activities were greatly enlarged, as was the anti-aircraft gun testing mission, because now, after World War One and the intervening years, the plane had started to make a great difference in war. The proving grounds technological contributions in the war effort include the world's first digital computer, ENIAC, that was developed during World War Two. The first man portable antitank weapons system, you know it better as the bazooka, and the first systemwide practical applications of statistical quality control.

In the early 1970s, along with its normal military testing, the Aberdeen Proving Ground tested NASA's lunar rover. When 9/11 happened, we are jumping forward quite a few years, it went into high gear in preparing the Army to fight the War on Terror. And they especially concentrated on hardening vehicles against improvised explosive devices, which we know by its acronym IED.

Its scientists and researchers continue to try to keep America's army ahead of the technological curve. You can imagine how much technology is happening now. It is just exploding, and they are being kept on their toes. So this means that they never stopped looking for and testing out advances in equipment, weapons, tactics, and organizational methods. They do this by experimentation, both virtual, now, on their computers, and actual. They test new command and control systems to catch and document and solve every flaw because they do not want those flaws to appear in the midst of battle. Whether it is a new weapon, bullet vehicle armor, uniforms, or what have you, if it goes with the American soldier, it must be tested, and the people at Aberdeen test it until they know everything about it and whether it is fit to be deployed as part of an actual U. S. Army load out for a mission.

Now we have probably seen the civilian equivalent of the Aberdeen Proving Ground. Computer companies, for instance, open and close the lids of laptops thousands of times to see at what point they will break. Paint companies expose their coverings to various real and simulated weather conditions to see how they endure the elements. They want to know how quickly their paints fade, crack, or peel. They want to see if it is going to stand up to the same quality as a competitor's paint. Car companies run engines and other mechanical parts to check wear and endurance, catch flaws in design. Tire companies are constantly searching for and fiddling with new compounds and even tread patterns to make sure their tires last longer, respond better in various conditions, run smoother, or what have you.

This goes to just about every product that goes out there, especially products that move in some way or are supposed to last for quite a while. They run them through rigorous tests. Of course, we have consumer agencies that do the same thing, like Consumer Reports. They will test things to find out whether they are a good deal for the consumer.

But that is what a testing ground or a proving ground is. It is a place where researchers prove the quality, or lack thereof, of a product that they are responsible for. Ultimately, it starts with raw materials that something is made of, and then it goes up to possible designs for their product, and then they actually mockup their product in some way. They then make working models of their product and finally they get to the point where there are approved products, and the approved or finished products are tested and

retested in every way imaginable to set parameters for pricing, marketing, shipping, replacement, future materials and design improvements, and many other things. They want to make sure that they know everything about their product, how it will react in every situation, how long it will last, and you could just go on and on. This is done mostly to cover their rear ends for lawsuits and, of course, so they will not run out of business so they can keep on producing whatever it is that they are producing and making money from it.

So if a manufacturer wants to compete in the cutthroat world marketplace, the testing stage, the proving ground stage, cannot be underestimated or underutilized. If they pooh-pooh the idea of testing, they are probably not going to last and their product will fade away.

God does not disregard the testing stage, either. As a matter of fact, it is an integral part of His plan. He is a manufacturer. Have you ever thought of Him in that way? He is a manufacturer of righteous character. Using the proving grounds in Aberdeen, Maryland, He is a general training Christian soldiers to lead His Kingdom alongside Him.

He is producing a line, if you will, of sons and daughters in the image of Jesus Christ. And instead of just running models through the testing grounds, instead of just taking one off the shelf and throwing it into the test that His people are running, He goes above and beyond and runs *every single product* through the proving grounds. He tests every person that He chooses, no matter who they are, what they have done, where they have come from. He puts them through the paces to check and improve their quality. He wants to know when they will break, too. He wants to know how well they will endure. He wants to know how they work in adverse situations. He wants to know how they work in good situations.

He wants to know everything about them and put them through as many tests as He can to give them the opportunity to show Him that they are His. He will not pass on any product that does not meet His high standards of righteousness. Because He is God, He has a reputation to uphold. He is not going to allow anything to pass that is slipshod and substandard, below the standards that He has set.

Today I am going to be continuing and concluding my series on God teaching us to think. His work with us is aimed toward getting us to think as He and His Son do, so that we can react to situations properly, whatever comes up, and make sound, wise decisions based on what we have learned, based on what we know, based on what we have experienced. He wants us to develop this character, this likemindedness with Him so that we can rule with Him in His Kingdom. So He tests us, or He proves us, on the proving grounds of human life.

Please turn with me to Romans 12. I mentioned in my last sermon, I believe, that this was the basic outline of my series and I want to give that to you again so you understand where I am going here and where I am headed. Verse 2 is especially the outline that I have taken.

Romans 12:2 And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God.

Now the first sermon concentrated on the challenges of education and how we must work hard to learn how to think carefully and logically. I do not know if you remember but I mentioned putting my kids through Latin class to help them to learn how to think, and that thinking is not an easy thing. We are very lazy in our thinking, and the mind must be trained to think properly and especially must be trained when we are called of God, because we have grown up and gotten into bad habits of thinking like people, like men. And that is not good, because God has called us to think like *Him*.

So we spend a lifetime, our converted lifetimes, learning how to think more like He does, and it takes a lot of hard work. I stress that throughout that sermon that we have to put our nose to the grindstone and do what is necessary to change our minds. That sermon ended with a look at the Greek word *metanoia*, which means a turn or a change of mind. It is most often translated as "repentance." What it actually implies, however, is not just changing your mind, but a radical reorientation of our minds that leads to a radical reorientation of our lives, the practice of what we do.

What He is doing is trying to turn us completely away from the our persistent conformance to this world and toward God and His holy righteous

character and way of life. But it is a wrenching change, and the only way we can do it and do it well is to change our minds, to change the way we think, to start looking at things and thinking about things like God does.

The second sermon, the last one, focused on the next clause in verse 2. The first clause, "Do not be conformed to this world," was basically my idea that started my mind rolling on the first sermon. But the second one followed the second phrase here, "but be transformed by the renewing of the mind." That was my main theme in sermon number two.

I do not know if you remember, but I said there in my introduction—which got a fair amount of criticism from some areas—that human beings do not change very much, that human beings are hardwired to resist change because change requires us to wrench ourselves out of comfortable patterns of thinking and behavior and learn and implement new ways.

We could just go down to the very simple illustration of trying to change a habit. How hard is it to change something simple like a wake-up time or something that you usually eat that you are not supposed to eat but you really like. I mean, how many of you would have a hard time putting down chocolate for the rest of your life? Or here is a big one with a lot of people these days: never having coffee again. That is a wrenching change. But if we say that, I am using this just as an example, if coffee were a sin (which actually some churches believe it is), would you repent of it? Would you put coffee away and drink water for the rest of your life? I mean, with some people, coffee is like, I do not know, holy water or something. They cannot imagine not drinking their cup of coffee or however many on any given day.

But that is just an example of how hard it is to change. What we eat and drink is rather minor in the great scheme of things, I mean we need to eat and drink, but the details of what we eat and drink are rather minor. We have known throughout history that people can have a very bland diet and still live to be rather old. Still be strong, still do what they need to do. But people are very particular about what they eat and drink. It is the same way with how they act, the various things that they do. And many of those things are sinful. They are anti-God. They are against what He is trying to produce in us, against His righteousness. But people do not want to change.

So I started with the idea that we are very resistant to change. During this sermon we spent a fair amount of time on the Greek word, *anakainosis*, Strong's #342 which is there in Romans 12:2 as the word "renewal." And the word actually does mean renewal. It means renovation. It means a complete change for the better. That is a very important distinction to make. It is a complete change *for the better*, to have a superior outcome. You probably remember I made several analogies, gave several metaphors to help us understand that the mind God is forming in us is not a new mind in terms of time, but a new mind that has been renovated like a house or a car or something could be renovated or refurbished. God is working on cleaning up our mind and improving it so that it is now of a higher quality, of a godly quality, far superior to the old mind.

He does not take out our old mind and plop in a new one. He leaves the old mind in there and He tells us to clean it up, clean it up to the point where it begins by the end of our lives to look like His own. This is supposed to be our constant pursuit. We are not supposed to be satisfied with the initial changes we make at conversion, the initial things we do when we are about to be baptized. But it has always got to grow from there. We have got to continually be cleaning out the bad stuff and throwing it away and putting in new stuff, good stuff, so that it resembles the mind of Christ. That is something we do every day. It is part of our daily repentance, our daily reorienting of ourselves toward God.

Now we come to the last half of Romans 12:2, "that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God." That is the subject of this sermon, proving what is that good and acceptable will of God. As we begin to unpack this clause, we need to first make sure (and this is why I have gone over this summary of the first two sermons in this series), that we do not miss the connection of the last half of the verse to the first half of the verse. They go together. I have kind of strung them out in three different sermons, but they are all a part of basically one activity—one activity with several parts.

When we do not conform to this world and we work on transforming ourselves by renewing our minds, we learn, we test, we prove, what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God. They are all part of one fairly seamless process if we do it properly. So our refusal to conform to this world

in our diligent efforts at transforming our minds into reflections of Christ's own mind, are the major factors that prove to us what God's will is. When we are engaged in this process of getting rid of the old stuff and putting on the new stuff, that is how we learn best what the will of God is.

So we learn and prove God's will by rejecting this world and accepting and living God's way of life. This is why Paul says in Ephesians 4 and also in Colossians 3 in the clothing metaphor, that we put off the old man like a raiment that has gone through the mill, as it were, full of holes and dirt. We take that off and we put on the clean, white, pure garments of Jesus Christ—His righteousness. He is the new man and we are putting on His image by going through that process of mortifying the flesh, getting rid of all that is bad and sinful in us, and putting on what is good and right and godly.

It is in this way that we begin to see and understand what God is doing with us. How God is working in us. How God is guiding and directing us. How God is opening the way for us for future things. Think about it this way. God has given us an instruction manual. It is right in your lap. It is 31,000 plus verses worth of instruction from God. It has become Scripture, written by men, yes, but inspired by God. Every word we are told is God-breathed. And that inspiration has produced a Book that we can go to to learn the will of God. We can know what the will of God is by reading this Book. We have the mental task before us, set by God, of reading, of studying, of meditating on, and discussing and accepting the Bible's instructions so that we can know what God is doing and what He wants us to do.

Like I said, 31,000 verses worth. It takes a lifetime to learn it and know it and be able to parse it and interpret it and even to think about it. We cannot claim that we have heard it all. We cannot claim that we know every ramification of what is in here. Sometimes we do not know every ramification of a given phrase because with the study of God's Word, we can look at something for the 5,000th time and come up with something new because we had not seen it in that way before. We had not thought about it in this situation before, and it brings out new light for us to understand.

So God's will is available to us in the Book. It is right there. All you have to do is read it and study it and meditate on it and think deeply about it and consider it and accept it. You can talk about it with your friends. You can

debate it. You can go back and forth about it. You can read commentaries to your heart's content. You can look up other books like concordances and dictionaries, and you can find out all kinds of things about the Bible and the way things were put together. But like I said, all of those things are essentially mental tasks for understanding the will of God, which means we need to learn how to think about things. Right?

Now we have help. God has given us His Spirit. Jesus tells us there in John 14, talking about the Spirit, that the Spirit brings things to mind. We come to understand things by applying the Spirit of God to what we read. So we have a *great* advantage over everybody else about how to learn and understand the will of God because God has given us that little bit extra, a lot bit extra, that is His Spirit. The carnal man does not know the things of God because he does not have the Spirit. So he cannot interpret things properly because he does not have the functionality, if you will, of God's Spirit, that extra help to let him know that, "Yes, you're on a good path here. You are coming to understand." Let us put this scripture in here and that scripture in there. Let us read this passage in this example and we can say, "Yeah, I see how all that fits together, and God is trying to do this and this also." He is working this other thing in here and we can see all of this.

We have what it takes because God has supplied the gift of the Holy Spirit, the gift of God's Word, and gifts of discernment, and whatnot so that we can have an understanding of His will. We could go to Exodus 20. You all know what is in Exodus 20, the Ten Commandments, and we can know that it is His will that we put Him first, that we do not bow to idols, that we bear His name honorably, that we keep the Sabbath, that we honor our parents, that we do not kill, and on and on it goes through the whole of the Ten Commandments. They are very precise and very concise statements of God's will. This is how He wants us to act.

And so, if we are a son or daughter of God, we look at Exodus 20, we think about it, and we say "I am going to do these things because they are God's will."

We could go to Matthew 5 and look at the first 10, 12, 13 verses and know that in His will from the mouth of our Savior Himself, that we should develop an attitude of spiritual poverty; that we learn through grief and

suffering; that we deal with life and others with meekness; that we hunger for righteousness; and on and on it goes throughout the Beatitudes. That is how we are supposed to approach life, Jesus says. That is the way you become children of God. That is the way you are going to inherit the earth.

Then we can turn to Galatians 5 and know that it is His will that by His Spirit we should produce in our lives, in our character, things like love and joy and peace and longsuffering and kindness and goodness, etcetera, all of those fruit of the Spirit that we see in verses 22-23. And these should be produced and be flowing through our relationships with one another. That is how you live in the Spirit and not in the flesh, because we are supposed to be putting off all those fleshly things. And the things that we are producing are these spiritual things.

They are all clear, obvious statements of God's will. And there are thousands of others. Like I said, 31,000 plus verses in this Book that let us know what God's will is. We just have to dig them out. We just have to read them. We have to keep them on our minds. Memorize them if we need to.

But do you notice what they have all been, what I have talked about here? These things are all declarations of God, where it is very clear what He wants us to do. They are very easily seen, and while we can and should, to a great extent, take them on faith as the wisdom of God and good for us at all times, certainly that is the case with the Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes and the fruit of the Spirit and a lot of other things. We need to just accept them, take them on faith, know that they are God's wisdom, know that they will produce good for us.

But God does not want us merely to learn and accept them. That is only the first step. As a matter of fact, children could learn and accept them. How many of us put our kids through the process of learning the Ten Commandments, or learning what the fruit of the Spirit are, or learning what the Beatitudes are, or any number of Bible verses that we may have them memorize in one way or another? In a way, just learning and accepting God's declarations is a child's exercise, and those are things that we do when we are babes in Christ. Right? That is the milk, if you will, of the Word that we take in when we are when we are young in the faith, when we are growing up, maybe in the church.

But you know there is stronger stuff that Paul and Peter, especially, tell us that we have to move on to. Just learning and accepting God's will in terms of what He declares in the Bible is just a starting point. No, God wants us to take what we have learned and accepted and prove them. That is what it says in Romans 12:2. He says He wants us to prove what is good and acceptable and perfect in His will. So He wants us to put them to the test, put His declarations to the test, so that we are convinced, that were *convicted*, that they are indeed the wisdom of God and good for us at all times.

You know, Christians are often accused of taking things on faith. "God said it, I'm going to do it," and that is a great attitude to have, but God does not want us to stop there. He wants us to prove everything. Now, this does not mean we have to go out and murder someone to know that God does not want us to murder. But it does mean that God is probably going to put us through the test where we have to really control ourselves so that we do not murder somebody. And it does not have to be murder as in shoot a gun, kill him. Jesus tells us in the Sermon on the Mount that murder is just calling somebody a fool or being so enraged at them that you wish that they were dead. That is how God tells us and teaches us and helps us to prove that His will is good and acceptable and perfect.

Now we could go through a lot of thought exercises and learn and accept these things fine. But that is not as effective as the method that God actually uses with us. God makes us go through a lot of particular situations where we have to employ His will and think about His will and actually react to the facts of His will in a situation oftentimes where we do not want to do His will. Or where there is some outside pressure on us keeping us, we think, from doing His will, an axe poised over the back of our neck, as it were, a knife under our throat, something that we think that if we act as God wants us to act, we are going to die, or where there is going to be some very terrible adverse reaction.

We do not have to take it to this extreme. It could be something that is just uncomfortable. But God puts us through situations where we are required to prove that His way is the best way. So He does not want us just to learn the declarations of His will. He wants us to hop in the driver's seat and take them out for a spin, because that is the only way we will truly *know* they are God's

good will. Otherwise, they are just a mental exercise. Once we have proven those things by experience, then they are engraved on the bone, if you will. They are deeply set in us and they can become part of our characters, then, because we have experienced it, we have gone through it, we have seen it, we have proved it, and we agree. "Yes, God's way is right and good and totally acceptable and perfect."

Now the key word in this Pauline phrase in Romans 12:2 is "prove." Obviously, it is the Greek word *dokimazo* Strong's #1381. Its stem or its root is *doke*, and it indicates watching or observing. And that is a lot of what you do when you are trying to prove something. You watch it, you observe it, you see it in action. And then, of course, it implies some sort of evaluation after that. *Dokimazo*, though, is a common verb. It is used very frequently in Greek, and it means "to test" or "to try something," "to prove."

We can find use of it in Luke 14:19. In a parable that Jesus is giving there, He speaks about a man asking to be excused from the invitation he was given because he needs to *test* five yoke of oxen. Very simple example of what this verse means. The man was making an excuse because he wanted to go out into the field with his oxen and put yokes on them to find out how they would work as pairs, how they would pull together to plow his fields. So he was going out and he was going to put these oxen through the paces. He was going to *prove* that they could work together. It does not say much for this man that he had bought the five yoke of oxen before he had proved them. This was Jesus' way of poking fun at these people. They would rather do that than be His followers. But the man wanted to see how well the oxen worked together. Very simple illustration of testing in terms of *dokimazo*.

In terms of people, though, if you are testing people, it can imply both what we call vetting, a vetting process, where you are seeing if somebody is qualified or if he has any bad things in his background that might disqualify him for a certain position. It also means examining, say, for instance an interview for a job is very much like this. It is a testing or examining process to see if a person is qualified or is fit for a certain position in a company. So that is how it works with people.

It can often have the sense of to find something or someone to be X, whatever X is that you want to prove or disprove. Usually X is a standard or

a desired outcome, so it could mean to find something or someone to be up to this particular standard. Or, let us just use it in a more specific sense. Let us say you are the owner of a racing team and you need a driver. (I love racing metaphors.) Well, you want to *dokimazo* them, that person, whoever it is, because you want to find out whether that driver is really a driver, if he has what it takes to be a driver. You would do the same thing in any area of life. If you are trying to hire someone, or what have you, you are trying to find out if that person has the qualities of X, whatever it is that you are trying to figure out.

Now, usually the testing that *dokimazo* represents is to show or to prove that a thing or a person is genuine or is reliable or is trustworthy or is experienced or is valuable, as in testing or proving, let us say, a gem or some metal. In our case, the testing in a lot of cases is whether we are worthy. Like I just mentioned, it is often used about testing the purity of metals like gold or silver. Let us go to one of those in I Peter 1. This one is very obvious here.

I Peter 1:6-7 In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested [There is the *dokimazo* equivalent.] by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

So here it is showing that God Himself puts us to the test to ensure the genuineness of our faith. He wants to see if our faith is actual, is real, if it will stand under pressure. And what we have in Romans 12:2 is that as God tests the genuineness of our faith, He requires us, He wants us, He expects us, to do the same. That is, to test His way of life and see how things come out, to see if we can prove then that His way of life is actually the superior way of life.

So "prove" back in Romans 12, verse 2 is not a bad translation at all. He wants us to prove that His will is good. That His will is acceptable. That His will is perfect. He wants us, as I have used the phrase before in the sermon, to put His will through the paces. He wants us to live it, to try it out in all its forms so we know that it is as advertised and that if God has said this and He has also said what will come of it if we do it, that is a promise, an outcome, a

desired outcome. And we then say, "Ok, I'm going to test this out." One of the ways we test this out, God even tells us to test it out in Malachi, is to tithe, to give Him His tenth. "Prove Me now in this," He says, "if I will not give you," showers of prosperity from heaven, as it were.

He tells us to prove it. How do we prove it? We tithe because He says He will bless us. So if we tithe and He blesses us, then we have just proved that His will is good and acceptable and perfect in this matter of money, this financial area of His way of life. If we give to Him His ten percent He is going to follow through. That is part of the test.

Are we at least willing to follow the command? Yes, we are. We are going to do this and God says, "I'll back it up. Here are your blessings." You have just proved this to be a worthy thing, a good and acceptable thing, a perfect thing with God. We have known many people who have done this and have also tried to prove it the other way, to stop tithing, which was foolish and the blessings stopped. God can prove it either way to you, but it is much better to follow His way so that He can give you the blessings for it, the desired outcome that He promises.

This phrase about proving things, proving God's will is found in a few other places, and I want to go there now to I Thessalonians 5:21. This is one of them. There are two others that we will also go to. I Thessalonians 5 is probably the best known of the ones where He tells us to prove things. He says,

I Thessalonians 5:21-22 Test all things; hold fast what is good.
Abstain from every form of evil.

Notice these are the same things that are said in Romans 12, verse 2 accept they are backwards. Verse 22 is the first phrase of Romans 12:2. The second clause there of verse 21 is the transforming the mind part, holding fast to what is good. And, of course, the test all things is the prove clause from Romans 12:2. So Paul's command though, here, test all things, is very general, but it is very clear by reading all of this that he wants us to test for goodness, and along with the next verse, that we reject and do not practice things that are evil. This is all the same process.

The apostle John in I John 4:1 uses the same sort of thing, but he specifies "testing the spirits" because we come across people of different spirits. He is mostly talking there about false prophets and the spirit that they bring, and he wants us to make sure that we reject those that do not pass the test. We have to test the spirits we encounter to see if they are of God, if they are in agreement with the will of God. So we are seeing that this principle is found in other places in God's Word.

But before going any further, we need to just maybe reiterate that this testing that is being done, or that God wants us to do, is not an easy, thoughtless, quick process all the time. Perhaps when somebody comes into the room and they are putting off another spirit and they are spouting things that are not godly, as we understand them, then it might be that we could pretty quickly determine testing the spirit that it is not of God. So it could seem like something that will just take a few seconds and we figured it out. We might have a gift of discernment where that sort of thing comes easily to us.

We know that the church in time past did not have a gift of discernment (some few may have), where the church was dragged through perhaps years of false teaching by people of different spirits. It was not, as I said, an easy, thoughtless, quick process in those cases. It often takes time, sometimes a great deal of time, to see the results of an action or the fruit of a person's teaching, let us say. It takes deep thought and discernment to evaluate their quality because we are human. We only see so much. Somebody could dress well. Somebody can speak well, and the results or the fruit of what they say, what their example is does not come out until after a long time, and only to those who are spiritually discerning. So we have to be careful.

God is not talking necessarily about snap judgments here. He is talking about being able to discern something and think it through and have a logical reason for why we come to the conclusion that we do after testing or proving something.

Like I said earlier, God gives us a head start to know good from evil in His Word. But we are often taught best through experience, through time, through various activities and trials. We are very stubborn. A lot of us take trial and error, and trial and error, and trial and error before something finally gets through that we are doing something wrong or that something else is

happening that should not be and we then make that determination. But it is over this process of experience over time that God gives us all the data we need to determine if a thing conforms to His will or not.

What I am getting at here is we should not think that this process of determining God's will, proving God's will, is something that is going to be easy. It takes a lot of thought. That is why I included it in my sermons on teaching us to think.

Now God is perfect. He can make these kind of judgments quickly. We are not. We are human, so we oftentimes need a great deal of time to determine these things. And that means, especially in areas that concern other people, that is, our relationships with one another, we need to take the time. Snap judgments in relationships are often disastrous. We need to take time, have patience with the other person, be forbearing, have mercy, not take your club and beat him over the head because maybe the first thing out of their mouth was what you did not consider to be right and good.

This happens a lot. Happens a lot in families, happens a lot in churches. We get offended. God says that we need to be careful. We need to be loving. We need to be kind. We do not need to be judgmental in that way. We need to evaluate. But do not take God's prerogative of judgment from Him. Best to allow it a little bit of time. Allow it to mellow, if you will, and learn whether your judgment was correct or not.

Let us go to another one of these in Ephesians 5.

Ephesians 5:8-10 For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light (for the fruit of the Spirit is in all goodness, righteousness, and truth), proving what is acceptable to the Lord.

Ephesians 5:15-17 See then that you walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

This passage makes it plain that proving what is acceptable to the Lord is an integral part of our Christian walk. This is the reason we have been called. This is the reason why God has made us children of light. This is why we are light in the Lord, as he puts it. Here we are light because His light is in us. He has put His Spirit in us. He has made us the light of the world, as it were. That is not supposed to be hidden. He has given us His truth, we are to make a witness. So we are light in this world. We are the only ones that are actually following His will as we understand it.

So as we go through the process of proving what is acceptable, what is His perfect will of God, we produce or manufacture in our characters the overall fruit of the Spirit, goodness, righteousness, and truth. That is what that is in there for. We are children of light, we are made children of light by His Spirit, and by our practice, by our walking through this world, by the the experiences that we go through, we are to be producing those fruits, specifically goodness, righteousness, and truth. That is the mind of God for you right there.

Verses 15-17 repeats that this proving of God's will is part and parcel of our daily walk. So Paul warns us here to be circumspect. Circumspect literally means "to look around." He wants us to be awake and aware. He wants us to look around us at all times so that we can be wise in how we live. He wants us, as he goes through here, to make sure we are not wasting time on distractions and foolish things because time is short. Not necessarily that Christ is going to come back tomorrow or next week.

But we do not know how much time we have. I could walk out of here and cross the street and get hit by an SUV, and that would be the end of my time. What will I have accomplished by that point? So since we do not know when our time is going to end, we have to prioritize this proving and testing process and not procrastinate because we do not know how much time we have left. We do not know how much time God has set out for us to complete this task that He has given us. We do not know. We are getting up in years, many of us. I know some of you are just getting started, but there are plenty of gray hairs out there in the congregation, and we just do not know.

So Paul tells us here to get serious. Put God's Word to the test. That is the way we are going to learn it and make it part of our characters. We cannot afford to waste time. It is a most precious commodity. So he says, "Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is." We understand it by proving it, by living it.

Another passage close by here, one page flipped over for me, is Philippians 1. This was on Paul's mind constantly. Have you noticed Romans, Thessalonians, Ephesians, and Philippians? They are all saying the same thing.

Philippians 1:3-5 I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine making request for you all with joy, for your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now.

Philippians 1:9-11 And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in knowledge and all discernment, that you may approve the things that are excellent, that you may be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, being filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

This passage links God's continuing good works in Christians with our simultaneous work of growing in love, of gaining spiritual knowledge, of learning discernment, and approving the things that are excellent, those things that are of God. Now Paul stresses that this job of proving the good and acceptable and perfect will of God, along with these other works, is a major facet of our efforts to glorify and praise God. That is how he ends it. Do all these things in Christ Jesus to the glory and praise of God.

You want to know how you can glorify God? *Live according to His will.* It is very simple. That is how our light shines. It has got to be noticed because it is so different. God says you cannot put a bushel basket on top of it. That just does not do. It has got to be seen. So live it, prove it, and glorify God.

That is how you do it. Because if you are doing what is right, if you are going through life living His way, producing the fruit of the Spirit, which we

have seen mentioned in most of these passages where he has been talking about proving or approving these things, the product is the fruit of the Spirit. The fruit of righteousness, he calls it here. Those things are going to be produced. And what does Jesus say in John 15:8? That by producing much fruit, the Father is glorified. It is all the same teaching. But you produce that fruit by living the way of life that He has brought us to live. And God will be so pleased because His children are conforming and being transformed into the image of His Son. And that makes Him happy.

Okay, we are going to go to a strange place right here—Genesis 12—because I wanted to give you an example from Scripture of this thing that I have been talking about, this proving the will of God. And I thought, "Why not Abraham?" Everybody knows the story of Abraham, so it is very easy to see. But let us just read the first four verses here.

Genesis 12:1-4 Now the Lord had said to Abram: "Get out of your country, from your family and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." So Abram departed as the Lord had spoken to him, and Lot went with him. And Abram was 75 years old when he departed from Haran.

We do not know how much God revealed to Abram of His way. Did He tell him the Ten Commandments? Did He recite the Beatitudes to him? Did He tell him about the fruit of the Spirit? We do not know. It does not say. What we see here in the first three verses, especially, of Genesis 12, is only the bare-bones of His command and promises to Abram. I am sure there was more. I am sure they developed a relationship, and especially over time. But I am thinking right here at the beginning, how much did He tell Abram? Abram probably had a supernatural experience with God to wake him up, for one thing, and then Jesus, who was the God of the Old Testament—the Lord—gave him these instructions.

If nothing else, this is simply the framework of what God's will was that was revealed Abram. So the framework says what we have here in Genesis 12 is that God's will was for Abram to leave Ur and live in Canaan. That was

God's will for Abram at the time. If he did that, God says He would make him a great nation. He would bless him. He would give him honor and greatness and so forth, as all the blessings there that God enumerates.

Finally, God says that He would bring Messiah from his progeny. There is the last one. "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." A Messianic prophecy.

All these are great and wonderful promises. But notice that most of the fulfillment of them are long term. Far after Abram would be dead. There is only a couple of them that applied to Abram in his life. So these promises, great and precious promises, as we have heard, are way out there in the future, Abram could hardly understand them, would never see them fulfilled. But there are a few that were, and he hung on to them.

So Abram put God to the test. How do I know that? "So Abram departed as the Lord had spoken to him." That is what verse 4 says. "Okay, God. Fine. You want me to go to Canaan and You're going to give me these great and wonderful promises. We'll see." So he left Ur of the Chaldees with his dad and his family and went to Haran, and eventually from there went to Canaan. That is how Abram proved the good, acceptable, and perfect will of God. He did what He said. He put the commands of God into action. He could not have the promises without obedience, whether those in his lifetime or those that would be hundreds or thousands of years in the future. He had to obey the command.

And God put him through trials! Do not think that Abraham's life was cushy. He had to go through that famine in Egypt, where he lied and had to suffer the consequences of that. He made him wait twenty-five years before He gave him the first fulfillment of one of those prophecies, that he would even have a son that would be the one through whom the Promised Seed would come.

Abraham had to prove God's will all along the way. He proved God's command against lying in Egypt by learning the hard way that lying was not good and then he had to relearn it in the court of Abimelech. He proved the principle of one man and one woman in marriage the hard way in his life after his and Sarah's poor decision to get their heir through Hagar. He was

proving God's will, but he had to suffer, actually, for it to be put in to his character. He proved God's mercy and justice in his pleading with God for Sodom and for the life of Lot. And he really proved God's will when God told him to sacrifice Isaac on Mount Mariah.

This is why he was a righteous man because he continually believed God, that if he would follow His commands, he would receive the promises. And God said, "That's faith. When you believe Me and do what I say, prove My will, that is faith." That is walking forward in faith. That is proving what is acceptable and good in God's eyes.

Hebrews 11:8-19 By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would afterward receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God. By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised. Therefore from one man, and him as good as dead, were born as many as the stars of the sky in multitude—innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore. These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. [That is the process.] For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. And truly if they had called to mind the country from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity return. [They were not going to conform to the world. Also Romans 12:2.] But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them. By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, of whom it was said, "In Isaac your seed shall be called," accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead, from which he also received him in a figurative sense. [So he put God to the test.]

"If God has said that this will be my seed, my seed will come through Isaac, then if He says to kill him, He will resurrect him." He put Him to the test. He got as far as lifting the knife over his head to bring it down on his son. And God says, "That's enough. Now I know you are faithful. Now I know you'll follow Me in everything, and I give you your son."

This is the pattern, or an example of the pattern, that we need to follow. Abram was the father of the faithful. We need to follow that same way. If God says it, we do it, and God will respond in a proper way. Then we will know what is His good and acceptable and perfect will of God. If we are focused and perceptive, we will prove the will of God by living with Him every step of the way. We prove it, as in the example of Abraham, when we fail and sin, and we prove it when we succeed and bear righteous fruit.

God wants us to fail less frequently and succeed more frequently. If we do those things, that is, succeed more frequently, we will bear righteous fruit. And why is that? Because we are thinking all along the way. We are seeing God at work in our lives and we are considering how He has guided and directed us in this situation and that—where He has helped us, where He has hindered us, where He has blessed us, where He has disciplined us—so that we would grow into the image of His Son.

In order to grow in these things, in order to become better, that is, more righteous and more holy, we have to be thinking these things through and understanding, then, His will. This means we have to be alert. We have to be evaluating ourselves and our situations at all times and seeing where we stand in relation to God. As potential sons and daughters of God, we cannot afford to live carelessly or thoughtlessly, and especially in these times. Who knows where this country is going? What we just saw in Washington, and the reaction to it, makes you wonder.

But we have been called at this time to learn, to think, and judge like our Savior, Jesus Christ. And to do that as a mere human being requires intensive effort, and it has got to be more intensive as things get worse. A Christian cannot be lazy in his or her thinking. Do you think God is lazy in His thinking? And if He is making us in His image, then we have to be very vigorous in our thinking, very insightful.

So God wants us to hone our minds to a razor's edge, if you will, to cut through the peripheral and the extraneous to get to the heart of any matter or situation and discern good from evil. As I conclude here, I just want to read another passage from Hebrews.

Hebrews 13:20-21 Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, make you complete in every good work to do His will, working in you what is well pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.