



What is one of the most common questions of teens and college aged people? Most of them routinely ask, “What is God’s will for my life?” Which career do I choose? What school do I attend? Where will I find a good Christian husband or wife? These are the kinds of questions young people ask themselves as they begin to make their way in the world. But if life doesn’t go the way we wanted it to go, sometimes even fifty year old’s ask the same questions, right? Which career do I choose? What school do I attend? Where will I find a good Christian husband or wife? Just what is God’s will for my life? That’s always a good question to be asking.

I can stand here with absolute confidence and tell you that I know what God’s will is for your life. After all, if you were here last Sunday, you know that I had an accurate prophetic word from the Lord fourteen years ago. 😊 No, that is not the reason I know God’s will for your life. I don’t pretend to know your specific career path or who you should marry, but I do know God’s will for your life. If you stick around to the end of the message, I’ll tell you what it is. But first, a story about an Olympic medalist.

Matt Emmons has competed in four Olympics and has won a gold, a silver and a bronze. His first gold medal came in his very first Olympics in 2004. In his second event, his second gold medal was basically already hung around his neck. He only had one shot left. He was so far ahead of the competition that all he had to do was hit the target. Accuracy was not really even an issue. He looked at the target, took careful aim, controlled his breathing—all of the habits that he had trained himself to do for most of his life. He slowly squeezed the trigger and almost as soon as you could hear the explosion of the gun, everyone could see that he had hit the target dead center. It was almost a perfect shot. Except that he had hit the wrong target.ⁱ He had made a rare error in shooting sports. Matt had cross fired and hit the target next to the one he was supposed to hit. Speaking about that fateful shot, Emmons said, "On that shot, I was just worrying about calming myself down and just breaking a good shot, and so I didn't even look at the number," he said. "I probably should have. I will from now on."ⁱⁱ

I can’t imagine how difficult it would have been to deal with that kind of mistake at that perfect moment. But it raises the issue of how often you and I hit the wrong target in life. Our form was

good. We practiced the move and it all looked quite impressive until we realized we hit the wrong target.

I think churches can be especially skilled at looking good on the outside but still hit the wrong target. We can usually spot an unhealthy church when we see it but can we identify a genuinely healthy church? What does it look like? What standards do you use to identify health? Physical health can be a bit easier to nail down—usually. For example, at this moment I feel pretty healthy but I have not had a true check-up in decades. I don't have the slightest idea what my HDL and LDL levels are. I exercise and eat pretty well but maybe it's just a facade. Maybe I'm a ticking time bomb and don't even realize it. So how do we know what a healthy church even looks like? What if we are aiming at the wrong target. What if our church feels healthy but in reality, we are about to have a major spiritual heart attack and not even know it? Many churches would fit into that category—and we don't want to be one of them.

Ever since I arrived in Viroqua almost seventeen years ago, the target at which I have been aiming is that we would be a Biblically healthy church. When we were still a church plant and people would ask me what my vision was, I'd always tell them that we are aiming at becoming a Biblically healthy church. We want to know and do the whole counsel of God. But that's a big subject—a big target if you will. We have had ways of identifying what that looks like but in my opinion, there's never been a crystal clarity on what that should look like. There might be fifty things on that list. I don't know about you, but I don't do fifty things very well. Can you relate?



That's why I was pretty excited about our discipleship brochure we worked out last Fall. We know that Jesus' last command was to make disciples of all nations, so we started with paper and pen and those of us who were at the LEAD last September wrote a long list of descriptions of

what a disciple would look like. This has often been called a DDP—a Description of a Discipled Person. This is one way to define our target—what we are aiming at.

We spent ninety minutes scouring through Scriptures looking for answers and then we combined our lists. There were more than fifty things on that list. It was a great list. It was a list that defined what a person might look like if they were fully discipled. It was a good list but fifty things is a lot. I don't do fifty things at once very well. Can you relate?

At the next LEAD in October we took those fifty plus necessities of discipleship on that list and distilled them down to three major categories, which are what?

Abide in Christ
Shepherd the Body
Rescue the Perishing

This really begins to simplify the target we are aiming at. Instead of fifty things we only have three. And notice that they are all based on relationships. These are not things to do so much as they are relationship to develop. They are actions but they are aimed at relationships. We abide *in Christ*. We shepherd *the body*. We rescue *the perishing*.

I wrestle a little bit with this last area. In naming the three main areas of ministry, we really wanted to use Biblical terms. People use different terms to describe the same thing.

Abide in Christ	Upward	Transformation
Shepherd the Body	Inward	Community
Rescue the Perishing	Outward	Mission

There's nothing wrong with these other terms but as I said, we really wanted to be centered on Biblical terms which are aimed at relationships. I really like Abide in Christ and Shepherd the Body. I think they really capture what are to do and with whom we are to do it. But lately I have been wrestling with the last category.

I like the word perishing because it accurately describes lost people. Without Christ, they are perishing. We've heard an endless news cycle on Hurricane Harvey and especially Hurricane Irma. Millions of people lived in mandatory evacuation zones. Though we may never know how many people actually did leave their homes behind, it will stand as the largest evacuation in human history. And why were they ordered to evacuate? So they would not perish. The nation and the entire world has been focused on these hurricanes. All of the weather forecasting and warnings have been focused on the reduction of death and suffering because they know that powerful hurricanes mean that people will perish. Money, food, time, resources and people have and will continue to pour into Florida for months to come so that further suffering is kept at a minimum.

We get this when it comes to hurricanes—people perish—but when it comes to eternal matters of faith, it is easy to lose sight of the fact that people are daily perishing without Christ. It's a very Biblical word and it should help to keep the urgency before us.

I also like the word rescue, for it is also a common Biblical term for salvation and it emphasizes the fact that perishing people need to be rescued. The only reason I struggle a little with the term is because rescuing the perishing is not our job. Every time the word rescue is used in Scripture in regard to salvation, it is God who is doing the rescuing. Believers don't rescue anyone. Our job is proclamation of the truth of the gospel in love. In humility, we point people to Jesus and he does the job of rescuing them. But at least we participate in the rescue mission. I think rescue the perishing is a good Biblical term as long as we always recognize that we are part of the rescue mission but clearly not the ones doing the rescuing.

This is what we are aiming at. This is our target. These are our target relationships and our target actions. So how do we do it? The target is all important. If we don't know what we are aiming at, we are sure to hit it. This is what all of our ministries should be focused on and what all of our lives should be focused on. In theory, you should be able to pattern your life after these three relationships.

That's the target, that's the direction, but how do we get there? The process is built into this passage. Paul tells us and it's nothing you haven't heard a dozen times before. *to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.*

Let me ask you a vital process question. Do you need to become mature so that you can serve in ministry or do you need to serve in ministry so that you can become mature? You might say both are true, and you are right. They overlap and flow together—no doubt. But look again at the order laid out here.

to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.

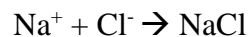
Do you see it? First you are equipped. We'll see in a minute what that looks like. Then you do ministry. Notice that it does not say for the work of the ministry. "The ministry" is a common phrase used to describe someone who is in full time vocational ministry. No doubt you have heard someone say something like this, "I was in Bible college when the Lord called me into the ministry." What they mean by "the ministry" is full-time ministry as a vocation—the pastorate, the mission field or the like. This is not an equipping for the ministry but for ministry. All ministry done by every believer. It's nothing special. It's nothing extraordinary. It's ministry. It's service.

And who is getting equipped here? The saints are getting equipped. So what we need to do first is to find the saints among us—the super Christians—and equip them for ministry. Is that what this is saying? Absolutely not. A saint is a believer. Paul wrote the letter we are reading "to the saints who are in Ephesus" (Eph. 1:2). He didn't write the letter to a select group of super Christians in the church. He wrote the letter to all believers in the church. That means that every believer is to do the work of ministry. Is anyone exempt from this? Are there any exceptions? If you are a saint—a believer—then you are to be equipped for ministry.

It's the ministry that then brings maturity. Let me say that again. Ministry first and then maturity. And that continues for the rest of your life—*until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.*

Ministry first and then maturity but far too often we reverse these two. We think that once we have grown to a certain level of maturity then we will be ready to do ministry. In certain areas of ministry that is still true. We just announced our October congregational meeting and the election of elders. We're not going to take a new believer and make him an elder. There are Biblical qualifications for an elder. There is a certain level of maturity that is required to lead a church. And that goes for other leadership positions as well. It's just not wise to take a new believer and put them into a leadership position. But other than that, there is no level of spiritual maturity necessary in order to do ministry. Ministry first and then maturity. It's the ministry that leads to maturity.

Ministry alone does not lead to maturity. Obedience to the word of God is also necessary. Ministry without character formation is dangerous but character formation without ministry is lifeless. What do you get if you immerse a block of solid sodium into chlorine gas? All by itself, sodium is highly reactive and fairly dangerous. Chlorine gas is poisonous but if you mix the two you get table salt.



Not that you would do this at home, but the reaction between sodium and chloride is dangerous. It gives off a lot of heat and of course you don't want to breathe in the chlorine gas while it's reacting but in the end you get pure table salt that you could sprinkle on your scrambled eggs. Sodium by itself won't produce salt but it's absolutely necessary for salt production. Chlorine gas by itself won't produce salt but it's a necessary component.

In the same way, ministry by itself won't produce maturity but it's a necessary component to maturity.



I think it challenging to us to see that ministry comes before maturity because we usually have that backward. Two weeks ago I told the story of Joy Brown whose pastor did not allow her to join any more Bible studies because she already had enough knowledge. She had knowledge and obedience but very little maturity to the pastor challenged her to lead a teen girl's study and it turned out to be one of the best things that ever happened to her.

Ministry leads to maturity but maturity also leads to more ministry, doesn't it? I don't mean more as in the number of hours you spend—though that might happen with you—but more in the sense of newer and deeper kinds of ministry that you were not prepared to do when you first started.

Remember when I said that I know God's will for your life? Well here it is. Do you feel tricked, a switch and bait maybe? Regardless, this is God's will for your life. No, I don't know which

career is best for you or which college you should attend or who you should marry. But I do know that this is God's will for your life. This is God's revealed will for your life. The specific questions about your future are called God's hidden will for your life. I think sometimes we have trouble answering the specific questions about God's will for our life because we aren't already busy doing God's revealed will for our lives. Doesn't that just make sense to you? First do what you know God wants for you and worry a little less about the things that are not as clear.

But there is a process here and it begins with equipping. The saints are to be equipped. All of the saints and the primary responsibility rests with the shepherds and teachers. By the way, most scholars believe that shepherds and teachers should be hyphenated. Shepherd and teacher are the same person. The gifts go hand in hand.

So what does it mean to be equipped for ministry? If we look at several other Scriptures that use this Greek word you begin to get a better picture.

Matthew 4:21—*And going on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and he called them.*

Luke 6:40—*A disciple is not above his teacher, but everyone when he is fully trained will be like his teacher.*

1 Thessalonians 3:10—*as we pray most earnestly night and day that we may see you face to face and supply what is lacking in your faith*

Galatians 6:1—*Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness.*

Mending. Trained. Supplied. Restored. Do you start to get the idea? I think equipping can be summarized this way. Equipping is being prepared with knowledge and skill to perform a task. It's as simple as that. We are equipped to walk, to brush our teeth, to add 2 and 2 together. Others are equipped to build a house, sew a quilt or program software. We are prepared with knowledge and skill to perform a task.

One of the power windows on Kellyn's car conked out. The mechanic wanted \$300 for parts and labor but I found the part on Ebay for \$29 and grabbed my mechanic sidekick named Ethan. He has helped me enough times and has more aptitude for mechanical things than I do so he ended up doing 90% of the work. I found a great Youtube video, got him started and set him loose. He got stuck at one point so my first question was, "Did you finish watching the Youtube video?" Is Ethan equipped? He is becoming equipped, right? And like all of life, he will always be in the becoming stage. When are you ever fully equipped? When have you ever mastered a technique or subject?

So the process is not that we first get fully equipped and then years down the road we enter into ministry. You get minimally equipped and then just do it. Ministry is always most effective when

it is on the job training. You go do it and then we talk about successes and failures and then repeat the process.

Now you might think I am a bit hypocritical since I went to seminary for three years to be equipped for ministry. Why would I need so much equipping before I did ministry? That might be the experience of some who go to seminary but it was not my experience. In fact, the reason I went was because I was already doing so much ministry. In college I spent four summers as a camp counselor. I was in a weekly 5am Bible study with men from church. I was asked to lead my church's youth group. The first year we were married, Karen and I were teaching children's church every week and I was teaching an adult Sunday School class. Then I was asked to serve on the deacon board. I think that was a mistake that they asked me to do that, but I was grateful for the opportunity. All of that happened before seminary. Then during seminary we were continually serving in one way or another. I wasn't saved until I was sixteen and I didn't have any Bible training so I really feel I needed seminary. But even then it only partially equipped me. Remember, to be equipped you need knowledge and skills to perform a task. Which of those do you think seminary provided—knowledge or skill? Almost exclusively knowledge. The equipping came while doing ministry.

If you want to be equipped better for ministry, we will help you. The first LEAD is this coming Thursday. That's part of what we do in LEAD. But don't wait to be fully equipped. Jump in as soon as possible. This is God's revealed will for your life.

Rich Maurer
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ⁱ <https://www.theguardian.com/sport/2016/mar/15/matt-emmons-olympic-shooter-cancer-rio-2016-games>

ⁱⁱ https://usatoday30.usatoday.com/sports/olympics/athens/skill/2004-08-22-shooting-emmons_x.htm