

Knowing God's Will *and Doing it Well*



A Collection of Good News Reflections

Terry A. Modica

New Wineskins, New Mornings

Mark 2:18-22
1 Sam. 15, 16-23



Do you know why we have mornings? Why do we need to go to sleep and wake up every day, day after day? Mornings are a sign of God's great mercy! He gives us new opportunities to make a fresh start every 24 hours.

When I was a child, one of the greatest lessons my father taught me was to never make important decisions at night, because the view is clearer and brighter in the morning.

In Mark 2:18-22, Jesus reminds us that if we pour new wine into old wineskins, the skins burst and we lose everything. Think of the new spiritual growth that you've experienced lately. Are you trying to pour your new life into old ways of doing things? I hope not, because this works as successfully as a pig getting a bath—he always returns to his mud. It's like making a New Year's resolution to lose weight and then stocking your kitchen with sweets. It's like reading the lives of Saints and then admiring the heroes on television who win their goals using immoral methods.

Less obvious but more significant, it's like following God's commands the way King Saul did in 1 Sam. 15, 16-23, starting out in the right direction but making compromises along the way and opting to sin.

When we set out on the right path (e.g., doing God's will, listening well for his guidance, purifying our behaviors, and working hard to avoid sin), it's appropriate to pat ourselves on the back for our spiritual maturity. But the sound of the pat-pat-patting easily distracts us from the quiet

voice of God as he tells us what to do or learn next. We become complacent. The day ends but we get stuck in the dark night, because our decisions hold us back from following Christ into new mornings.

In this pilgrimage on earth toward heaven, there's no such thing as sitting still. Evil forces tempt us louder and stronger when we're not busy working hard to move closer to God. They put a lot of effort into pulling us back into old ways and wrong paths.

To enjoy the new wine of spiritual growth, we must keep our eyes on Jesus. To do this, we have to remain ever-aware that we're always in danger of straying onto the wrong path, the old path, the self-centered path, the prideful path. We need to remain ever-aware that unless God is helping us, we are going to sin again at any moment.

This is why we need mornings. No matter what we did yesterday, each awakening gives us new opportunities to repent from yesterday's old wineskins and embrace Jesus anew. We can partake of the new wine that's consecrated into his blood in the Eucharist (ahhh, the blessings of being able to attend Daily Mass!), then take his hand and stay with him wherever he leads.

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You're Just as Important to Jesus as His Own Blessed Mother!

Matt. 12:46-50

How important are *you* to Jesus? As important as his own Mother, Mary the Queen of Heaven, the blessed and "highly favored one"!



We know Jesus had favorites: friends that he felt closest to, a mother he cherished, companions he enjoyed being with during the fun times, and a few whom he hoped would stay very nearby during the worst of times, but never did he show favoritism. John "the beloved" was an especially close friend. James the apostle was a relative whom he invited into the inner circle of the twelve. But as we see in Matt. 12:46-50, Jesus did not give anyone, not even his Blessed Mother, preferential treatment.

In this scene, Jesus is busy ministering to the crowds who flocked to hear him and be healed by him. Mary brings along some of the relatives who want to speak with him. Without a pause to find out what they want, he uses the opportunity to teach his listeners that they were all equally important to God. Anyone, he explains, who unites their will to God's will is an important member of God's family and is as loved and appreciated and valued as his own dear mother and family.

That means *you* are equally precious to Jesus! *You* are as important to God as anybody!

Can you accept this? Or do you suppose your problems exist because you're not special enough to God? And can you accept that everyone else you know is as important to God as you are? Even the ones you don't like?

Find the people who truly want to do the Father's will and you will find the favorites of Jesus. God loves everyone equally, but the blessed are those who work hard at being holy. If you want to enjoy the ones whom Jesus enjoys the most, get involved in a community of friends who love God and show it by loving others.

Enjoying the favorites, however, does not mean that we can treat them with favoritism. Look at how readily we give special favors to friends and family and the people who worship like us and the others who fit humanly-designed parameters of what is acceptable and what is not. Notice, for example, the size of the congregation at parish missions when it's not a priest who gives the retreat: The turnout is much smaller when the speaker is a lay person, even more-so if that lay person is a woman, because Catholics tend to show favoritism to priests.

Another word for "favoritism" is "prejudice." Jesus is not prejudiced against you or me or anyone in any way, even when we sin. However, he really enjoys being close to us when we cherish doing the Father's will. And that's when we most enjoy being close to him!

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Don't Underestimate Your Value

Romans 5:8

Romans 1:7

Psalm 16:3



Too often, instead of listening to God tell us who we are, we believe what our parents, teachers, and other significant people have said about us. "You'll never amount to anything!" may have been meant as a challenge to encourage us to strive for our full potential, but the child in us absorbed it literally. The words destroyed our self-image.

Intellectually, we may have disagreed with the assessments of others, but deep inside, where the child blindly trusts those in authority, the child's interpretation of the words has taken root. These falsehoods need to be erased by the power of God, and replaced with his words.

If you were to make two lists, one naming your faults and the other naming your good points, the fault category would be longer, wouldn't it? This is the way most people view themselves after a lifetime of being defined by others.

However, this is not the way God sees you; if it were, he would never call you to ministry. Ministries are not built on faults. Yes, God uses our weaknesses, but not as the foundation of the mission to which he calls us. If he did, our ministries would collapse when times got shaky, like a house on a fault-line during an earthquake. Rather, God bases our ministries on all that is good in us.

How much time have you spent examining what is good in you – and believing it? Let God teach you about how much he values you!

God Esteems You Highly!

God knows us exactly and intimately. We don't. Rather than assume we are so bad, so ugly, or so unlikely to be extraordinary servants of God, we need to take time to listen to him describe who we really are. We need to ask him to remove the blinders of low self-esteem.

Low self esteem says that we are far from being who we're supposed to be. It also says that we will never get there. God, though, esteems us highly, as it is written in Romans 5:8, "God demonstrates his love for this way: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." Yes, we have sinned. Yes, we are far from perfect. But the moment we chose to believe in the redeeming sacrifice of Jesus, God esteemed us so highly that he called us saints!

Do you think of yourself as a saint? St. Paul said that all who are loved by God are saints (Romans 1:7). Both the Old and New Testaments refer to the people of God as saints. Accept the fact that this is how God sees you.

Begin to see yourself that way!

To continue to live with low self esteem is like telling God, "You're wrong about me." How dare we contradict God? He says, "As for the saints on earth, they are the glorious ones in whom is all my delight" (Psalm 16:3).

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God Does the Extraordinary with Ordinary People

Acts 9:10-19

Are you looking for a way to make a difference using the gifts God has given you?



Since the earliest days of the Church, the apostles worked side-by-side with lay people in ministry. "Scripture clearly shows how spontaneous and fruitful was this activity," the bishops of Vatican Council II tell us in the Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People. "No less fervent zeal on the part of lay people is called for today," they wrote of the laity's "special and indispensable role in the mission of the Church."

Remember Judas and Ananias from the scriptures? Not the Judas who betrayed Jesus nor the Ananias who keeled over after betraying the early Church by lying about how much money he could donate. The other Judas and Ananias.

Who? Many people don't remember them, although they played a very important role in the Church. These were the two who ministered to a most undeserving, mean and nasty bully whom they should have feared because he was the biggest persecutor of the first Christians.

One day, Ananias was having a nice, ordinary prayer time, deepening his relationship with the Risen Christ, when Jesus appeared to him in a vision and said:

"I want you to go to Straight Street on the other side of town, to the house of Judas. He's got a visitor there that I want you to minister to."

"Sure. How do you want me to help him?" Ananias may have asked.

"His eyes have been blinded, and I want you to lay hands on him to restore his sight."

"No problem. You've used me to heal people before. I know what to do."

"Yes, but the man I want you to heal is Saul of Tarsus."

"What? You can't mean that! This man has attacked our saints in Jerusalem! And now he's here in Damascus to arrest all of us! You can't be serious."

Jesus must have sighed, as he surely does when we test his patience. How many times have we thought we understood situations better than God?

"Go!" Jesus commanded.
And Ananias went.

He and Judas were the first Christians to forgive Paul for his persecutions and to trust him. God had given Judas the mundane ministry of taking Paul into his home. He called Ananias to heal him and to empower him with the Holy Spirit.

These were two ordinary people, and after we meet them in Acts 9:10-19, we never hear of them again. And yet, what they did had an impact on the whole world, even to this day. They gave Paul his initial push into one of the most powerful ministries of evangelization for all time.

What kind of an impact can you have on the world as an ordinary person following God's calling to serve?

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Confused? Pay Attention!

Luke 12:54-59

Deut. 18:10-12

What big question about your life do you have? In Luke 12:54-59, we're reminded that we already have the answer! We know how to interpret the signs of nature; therefore we have the ability to discern what



God is doing in our lives and in the world. Are you surprised that you have this ability? If you're a person of prayer, constantly dialoging with God about everything that happens, the Holy Spirit is explaining to you what you need to know.

Are you worried about the future? We don't need to go to fortune tellers (which is a sin; see Deut. 18:10-12), and we don't need to seek out holy visionaries, because if we pay attention, God makes his will clear—not every detail of his plan, but certainly his will for today, one step at a time as we move into the fulfillment of that plan.

However, we get confused when we listen to the desires of our own will and it contradicts God's will, or if we listen to the voices of logic when God doesn't make sense, or if we trust the half-truths and lies that are spoken by Fear.

The portents are plainly evident. We would eliminate a whole lot of aggravation and misdirected decisions and mistake-laden frustrations, not to mention sins and self-inflicted sufferings, if we paid attention to the multiple ways that God delivers his guidance to us and then trusted in it. If we take note of the signs of the times, through the Holy Spirit we can discern the good changes

that are approaching. But we have to trust it. When hardships are hardest and the dark night is darkest, a new dawn is going to arise, and probably soon. When evil attacks us with greater vengeance, it's because the devil knows his time is short, praise Jesus! But if we focus on the problems and not on Jesus, we continue to feel frustrated and dissatisfied. We create our own misery!

The most important observation to make is the condition of our own soul. Jesus says, "Why not judge for yourselves what is right?" The answer is already within us, because the Holy Spirit—the Spirit of Truth—has been living in us since our baptism.

If you don't already have one, find a spiritual director, i.e., a priest or religious or qualified lay person who can help you read the signs of your life. Your local parish or diocesan offices probably have a list of spiritual directors you can choose from. But first, pray for discernment about which person the wind of the Spirit is blowing you toward!

God doesn't want us to be confused. He certainly won't ignore our need for the truth. He always answers our questions—and we hear him if we but pay attention.

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Self-Assessment Tests for Discerning Your Special Calling

Test #1: Getting to Know Your Giftedness

ANSWER THE FOLLOWING 5 QUESTIONS:

1. Think of any ministry you are currently involved in, no matter how small or insignificant it seems to be. How does this ministry advance the Kingdom of God?

2. Why did God call you (instead of your neighbor or another family member or another parishioner) to the particular ministries in which you're already involved?

3. What makes you special in the eyes of God?

4. What makes you special to the people around you?

5. What is it about your personality that contributes to this?