

## Behave!

By Tony Stoltzfus

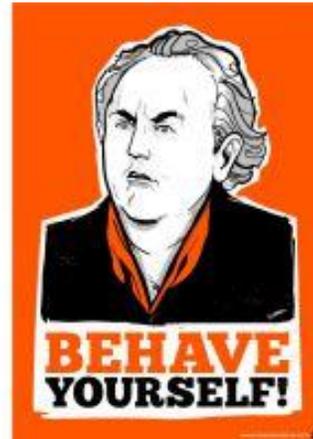
In the last couple newsletters we talked about the God of the Flatlanders, Christians who view God's will in life through a one-dimensional lens. For the Flatlander, life is a series of right-and-wrong choices, for each of which God has a predetermined "will." In the Flatlander's mind, their job is to figure out what the right choice is and go that direction.

We also discovered that the Father's focus is better understood in terms of relationship instead of choice.

For instance, suppose that you are offered a dream job across the country, but it would mean uprooting your family to go. What is the will of God for your life in this situation?

For a Flatlander focused on the choice dimension, it means God has a certain physical place in mind where you are supposed to live, and being "in God's will" means figuring out what that place is and living there. Success is making the right choice.

That decision looks totally different in the relational dimension. Because God's purpose lies in the vertical dimension of relationship, where you go on the horizontal dimension of choice is much less important. In fact, it often does not matter to him at all! Making the "right" choice is not about which place you live in, it is about inviting Jesus into the process and meeting him there. If you make the decision with Jesus, you are in God's will.



### Who Gets to Choose?

In Flatland, God makes up his mind what must be done and our job is to figure out his will and obey. But in a relationship where you and God have fallen in love, there are many matters where he loves to leave the decision to you. Several years ago I was facing a very difficult coaching session with a client who was in serious trouble. Before the appointment I was out walking and pleading for wisdom in how to approach the problem. Out of the blue I heard God say, "Why are you asking me? I like watching you function."

I wanted a word from him because I was scared and not feeling particularly hopeful. Instead of telling me what to do, he gave me what I really needed: confidence. He believed in me instead of giving me an answer. Often, it is God's good pleasure simply to watch us choosing, and exercising the free will he gave us through the mind of Christ he is planting in us. His enjoyment of us is often a greater purpose than our making the "right" choice.

Part of the desire for freedom God planted in us has to do with the ability to choose. A person with no choices is not free—and is not trusted or believed in, either. Freedom is a high priority for Father: he wants you to live in it and experience it. In fact, the Word says that "for freedom that Christ set us free" (Gal. 5:1). So let's experience his freedom in a new way. Pick a question or two from the list, and ask Father. Listen for a minute, then jot down whatever comes into your heart, even if you aren't totally sure it is him:

*"Father, what's a choice before me today where you want to enjoy watching what I choose?"*

*"What am I free to do today?"*

*“Jesus, here’s what I’d like to do with you today: \_\_\_\_\_. Want to come?”*

*“Is there a choice I’ve agonized over lately where it doesn’t matter to you which direction I go?”*

*“What happens inside you as a Dad when you release me to make a choice?”*

*“What do you believe about my ability to make good decisions?”*

To be clear, just because God’s purpose is focused on the relational dimension doesn’t mean that the choice dimension simply disappears. Just because I am jumping up and down doesn’t mean I can’t still go sideways. There are still good and bad choices in life. Sin still exists. The point is that in thinking like a Flatlander and focusing on choice, we are doing what Paul calls “starting with the Spirit and ending with the flesh” (see Galatians 3:3). We got saved by grace into a relationship with Jesus, but then we turn around and live as if the most important agenda during our engagement is figuring out Father’s will and doing it right, instead of being in love with our fiancé. God’s will is that we know him, and come into a full union of love with him. Everything else pales in significance.

## **Behave!**

So where did finding God’s will for our lives get to be such a big, hairy deal? It comes because we have a misconception of who he is. The Flatlander God is a Father whose first priority is that his children behave. It is so easy for us to fall into that trap, because we’ve been told to behave all our lives. Clean your room, put away your toys, eat your peas—from the first day we can remember, we were constantly told that toeing the line is part of the human experience.

But when the real Father, heaven’s Father, looks down at his children, getting them to obey the rules is the farthest thing from his mind! Actually, he does want us to behave—like kids, with all the noise and chaos and breakage that goes with it. When your kids were little, did you enjoy watching them play in the mud or build a snowman or race their Hot Wheels cars across the kitchen floor? In that moment, you were like your Father in heaven. His desire is that we enjoy life and enjoy him, and grow up having favor with God and man until we reach the same capacity for love and responsibility as Jesus.

In a recent workshop I had the group do the exercise I mentioned earlier, where they practice sharing their glory (we have glory because we share in Jesus’ glory) with each other. For one gal it was a very difficult exercise where she struggled to express herself. As Annie looked at why speaking up was so hard, she began to see how her home environment had shaped her. She grew up with a violent, alcoholic father, and beatings were a frequent occurrence. He hated noise, and the kids were punished severely for making themselves heard. Annie learned to behave and not speak up, because being quiet meant safety. Decades later, her husband was still getting in trouble with her for rustling the potato chip bag when he reached in for a chip, because you just don’t behave that way. Making noise was against the rules.

Annie had a very good reason as a child for developing the belief that she shouldn’t speak up or make noise. Many of our wrong beliefs are like that—they formed in painful situations where there was a real need to protect ourselves. There is no reason for her to feel any shame about forming that belief—but there is also now no reason to keep the belief,

either. The circumstances that taught her to protect her heart are no longer present. However, once a belief gets entrenched it often outlives the circumstances that spawned it.

It often helps to act in the opposite way of a belief we want to change. As I was listening to Annie's story I noticed a cluster of empty plastic water bottles on her table. I picked one up and said playfully, "Tell you what: for the next ten minutes, while I am talking to the group up here in front, I want you to crinkle up this water bottle and make noise."

Annie immediately froze into a deer-in-the-headlights look. I was asking her to misbehave, to make noise, and to do it right when the authority figure was talking! All the warning lights in her emotional brain were flashing red. After cajoling her a bit, I finally got a very timid squeeze. But then the whole group erupted in a cheer, and started calling for more. By the end of five minutes she was squeezing that bottle with gusto. At ten minutes, she had crushed every bottle on her table and people from other tables were whooping and throwing empty bottles to her across the room—while I was teaching! What a blast!

I think that's a pretty good picture of my Father, who is much more interested in setting us free than observing proper decorum. I got to model an Abba who cares enough about her to enjoy her noise—even to enjoy being interrupted! Freedom came to Annie that day when she learned that her Father in Heaven was more interested in loving her than getting her to behave.

Excerpt from *The Invitation* by Tony Stoltzfus, available at [www.coach22.com](http://www.coach22.com)