

**HOW TO UNDERSTAND AL-ANON:
KNOWLEDGE OF GOD'S WILL
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This article is one in a series about how Al-Anon works. Its purpose is to provide personal observations and a review of the literature that has been created and published by other authors. This article is educational in nature and is not intended for distribution, publication, or commercial use. Material cited or quoted in this paper is limited to the purposes of commentary, criticism, reporting, teaching, scholarship, or research in mutual-help groups.

The title of this article is simply one I use in the document filing system for my articles that I post. There are no implications contained herein that this article has received—or that the author has applied for—Al-Anon Conference Approval. I make no claim that the contents, opinions, or statements expressed herein are free of error. In fact, my opinions may be wrong. I welcome any corrections, deletions, or edits in terms of any empirical or factual inaccuracies.

As a preface to understanding Al-Anon, particularly for those who are unfamiliar with Twelve Step recovery programs, it may be useful to review how Al-Anon works. The “Suggested Al-Anon Preamble to the Twelve Steps” provides this brief description that is read at the opening of almost all meetings:

“The Al-Anon Family Groups are a fellowship of relatives and friends of alcoholics who share their experience, strength, and hope in order to solve their common problems. We believe alcoholism is a family illness and that changed attitudes can aid recovery.

Al-Anon is not allied with any sect, denomination, political entity, organization, or institution; does not engage in any controversy; neither endorses nor opposes any cause. There are no dues for membership. Al-Anon is self-supporting through its own voluntary contributions.

Al-Anon has but one purpose: to help families of alcoholics. We do this by practicing the Twelve Steps, by welcoming and giving comfort to families of alcoholics, and by giving understanding and encouragement to the alcoholic.”

(Al-Anon Family Groups, 2022, p. 12)

Al-Anon and Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) open their meetings with the Serenity Prayer, and many Al-Anon meetings also close with the Serenity Prayer. In addition, prayer is an implicit part of Steps 1 and 3, as well as an explicit component of Steps 5, 7, and 11. For example, Step 7 reads, “Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.” The concept of turning over our will is explicit in Steps 3 and 11.

Trigger Warning for Atheists

Some of the contents in this article involve ideas and words that may be triggering to atheistic readers. Please take care of yourself while reading this material. If necessary, you may need to take a break or debrief with a peer outside the room. If you need additional assistance, please contact your sponsor or your private psychotherapist. Expectations are that we all will be respectful of each other and will create a safe space for each other while reading this material.

Trigger Warning for Al-Anons

Some of the material in this article is drawn from sources other than Al-Anon Conference Approved Literature (CAL). If you are someone who reads only CAL, then proceed with caution.

Step 11 of Alcoholics Anonymous

The 11th Step, which Al-Anon adopted word for word from Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), reads as follows: "Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God *as we understood Him*, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out" (Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, 1981, p. 69, AA World Services, 1953, p. 96).

Prior to coming into AA or Al-Anon, a prospective member might have used some variant of this prayer, which is the antithesis of the 11th Step prayer: "Sought through power and meditation to improve my conscious contact with myself *as I understood Me*, praying only for knowledge of My will for me and the power to carry that out."

Prayer of Gethsemane

Tracing the history back to Alcoholics Anonymous and its predecessor, the Oxford Groups, the 11th Step Prayer originates from the Prayer of Gethsemane—"not my will, but thine, be done."¹ Those of us who practice this prayer do not petition for desired outcomes or specific results, as if we were God's spiritual director. Instead, we get into the flow of God being *our* spiritual director, and we pray only for knowledge of God's will and the courage to carry it out. We do our part (i.e., praying for an awareness and a discernment of God's will) and we let go of God's part (i.e., managing outcomes and results). It's God's will, God's way, God's timing, and God's outcome. God is not limited by our lack of imagination. It is not that we reject petitionary prayer, for rather this prayer is itself petitionary—praying for discernment of God's will. We don't always get an answer but we always get direction.²

The underlying theology of Twelve Step programs is that conscious contact with God can be improved through prayer and meditation. In their most basic forms, prayer involves talking to God and meditation involves listening to God. One question that often lingers in the thoughts of many members of the program is this one: "How do we know when we are following God's will and not simply following our own?"

There are at least five ways that I have found useful in discerning God's will day by day: Spending time in silence, seeing the ordinary experiences of life, hearing the voice of God in others, practicing spiritual virtues, and intersecting my passion with the world's needs.

Spending time in silence. Discerning God's will is found not only through prayer, by asking only for knowledge of God's will, but also with silent meditation. It is only in silence, regardless of what is going on around us, that we can hear the soft still voice that can barely be discerned. Without silence there is no solitude, and without solitude there is no spiritual life. In her classic book *Creative Prayer*, Emily Brigid Herman (1875–1923) describes one reason why solitude may be more important in modern times than it was many years ago. As Herman observes, "The one fact we forget is that the saints of old were capable of spiritual silence simply because they had not yet contracted our modern habit of ceaseless talk in their ordinary life. Their days were days of silence, relieved by periods of conversation, while ours are a wilderness of talk with a rare oasis of silence" (1995, p. 33).

Seeing through the ordinary experiences of life. I never see a burning bush—only faint wisps of smoke. Yet I've learned to see God in the ordinary experiences of life, and to turn the ordinary experiences of life into prayer.³ In *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*, Richard Foster (1992) describes the origins and dynamics of several types of prayer. It is the concept of "Praying the Ordinary" that can be most meaningful in moment-to-moment living throughout the day. It is often in the ordinary experiences of life through that we hear the voice of God. Foster discusses the concept of Praying the Ordinary by turning the ordinary experiences of life into prayer, seeing God in the ordinary experiences of life, and by "praying throughout the ordinary experiences of life" (p. 169).

Hearing God's will through the voice of others. Discerning God's will often involves talking with—and listening to—a sponsor, spiritual director, or Al-Pals in the program. As Sherlock Holmes observed, "Nothing clears up a case so much as explaining it to another person" (Doyle, 1893, p. 336).

Practicing spiritual principles and virtues. Following the will of God often means engaging in actions that are the opposite of our character defects (narcissistic self-interest, greed, holding on, and a sense of urgency) and practicing the spiritual principles (humility, simplicity, generosity, letting go, and patience). This practice first requires identifying character defects and shortcomings (Step 4), usually with the help of a sponsor or spiritual director (Steps 4 and 5). It often means practicing *flexibility* (not getting my way) rather than *rigidity* (only getting my way). Experience is what I get when I don't get what I want.

Intersecting my abilities, skills, and resources with the world's needs. In the words of the theologian Frederick Buechner (1926–2022), "Your vocation in life is where your greatest joy meets the world's greatest need" (Buechner, 1973, p. 95). Rose Fres Fausto (2021) paraphrases Buechner with a graphical representation that says, "God's will is the intersection of our greatest passion and the world's greatest need" (see Figure 1). For Fausto, the word *passion* does not mean something that makes a person "jump for joy." As described by Fausto (2021), "Passion always includes some sacrifice and it is not something we go out looking for hidden in a secret valley. It is something we discover in ourselves as we engage, as we do the work."

Ready, Willing, and Able to Act

One of Al-Anon's daily readers, *Courage to Change*, provides this wisdom:

"Confusion can be a gift from God. Looking back on instances when I felt desperately in need of an immediate solution, I can see that often I wasn't ready to act. When I became fully ready, the information I needed was there for the taking.

When I know too much about my options before the time is right to exercise those options, I tend to use the information only to drive myself crazy. That's why today, when I am feeling confused, I try to consider it grace. It may not yet be time for me to act.

I think that dealing with confusion can be like cooking. If the bread isn't done, I don't take it out of the oven and insist that it's time to eat. I let it finish baking. If a clear solution to a problem hasn't shown itself yet, I can trust that it will appear when the time is right."

(Al-Anon Family Group Headquarters, 1992, p. 45).

The Power To Carry Out God's Will

The Third Step Prayer of Alcoholics Anonymous is found on page 63 of the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous:

We were now at Step Three. Many of us said to our Maker, as we understood Him: "God, I offer myself to Thee—to build with me and to do with me as Thou wilt. Relieve me of the bondage of self, that I may better do Thy will. Take away my difficulties, that victory over them may bear witness to those I would help of Thy Power, Thy Love, and Thy Way of life. May I do Thy will always!" We thought well before taking this step making sure we were ready; that we could at last abandon ourselves utterly to Him.

(Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 2001, p. 63)

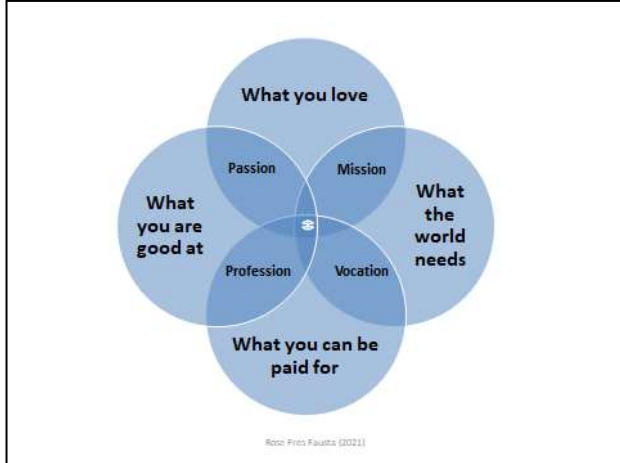
In Al-Anon's (1981) *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions*, it is stated this way:

"Some of us were amazed to find an idea flashing into our minds that we'd never thought of before, along with the conviction that it was the right answer. Having received such unexpected guidance, we could also believe that we would be given "the power to carry that out" (Al-Anon, 1981, p. 70-71).

Figures

Figure 1

The Intersection of Our Passion With the World’s Needs



Note: Adapted from Rose Fres Fausto (2021)

✱ Ikigai (ee-key-guy) is a Japanese concept that combines the terms *iki*, meaning “alive” or “life,” and *gai*, meaning “benefit” or “worth.” When combined, these terms mean that which gives your life worth, meaning, or purpose. Ikigai is similar to the French term “raison d’être” or “reason for being.”

Fausto (2021) applies the Japanese philosophy of Ikigai to further refine the concept of the intersection. Ikigai is the intersection of four things – that which you love, you are good at, the world needs, and you can get paid for.

Notes

1. "Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done" (Luke 22:42).

2. For those who take silent retreats at Cistercian monasteries, "The Merton Prayer" often awaits them in the desk or on the wall of their simple room. The prayer was written by the Trappist monk, Thomas Merton (1915–1968). The prayer, which is contained in his book, *Thoughts in Solitude* (Merton, 1956, p. 79), is shown as follows:

My Lord God,
I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
nor do I really know myself,
and the fact that I think I am following your
will
does not mean that I am actually doing so.
But I believe that the desire to please you
does in fact please you.
And I hope I have that desire in all that I am
doing.
I hope that I will never do anything apart from
that desire.

And I know that if I do this you will lead me by
the right road,
though I may know nothing about it.
Therefore will I trust you always though
I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of
death.
I will not fear, for you are ever with me,
and you will never leave me to face my perils
alone.

"The Merton Prayer" is from *Thoughts in Solitude*.
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Gethsemani.

3. I learned this concept from reading *The Practice of the Presence of God*, a collection of writings of Brother Lawrence (c. 1605–1691), compiled posthumously by Father Joseph de Beaufort. I learned "Praying the Ordinary" from Richard Foster's (1992) *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*. Foster discusses the concept of Praying the Ordinary by turning the ordinary experiences of life into prayer, seeing God in the ordinary experiences of life, and by "praying throughout the ordinary experiences of life" (p. 169).

Acknowledgements

Gary Neidhardt. I would like to express my appreciation to author and historian Gary Neidhardt for providing information, inspiration, and insight into the early history of Alcoholics Anonymous and Al-Anon Family Groups. He is not only the author of several books that reflect meticulous research and eloquent command of the English language; he is one of the few excellent writers who can also write computer code.

Deborah Midkiff. I would like to express my appreciation to book editor, counselor, and spiritual director Deborah Midkiff, MS, NCC, SD for providing text editing and proofreading of this manuscript. Because she is an avid reader who has been assessed as having a 40,000 word vocabulary, she was also helpful in providing some margin notes with alternative word choices.

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Published Nov. 01, 2025 | Updated Nov. 01, 2025

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Content and references last reviewed 2025

The correct citation for this article is Doverspike, W. F. (2025). *How to understand Al-Anon: Knowledge of God's will*.
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