



WESTLAKE HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

"The Doing of God's Will"

Lord, Teach Us How to Pray:

A Sermon Series on the Lord's Prayer

Matthew 26:36-46

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Introduction.

When my wife Lorie was in college, and before we met in grad school, there was a particular young man who was active in the university ministry in which she was involved. Lorie was a new Christian, and she was eager to meet other believers and get to know them, so she was friendly with everyone. One day this young man asked if he could talk to her privately, and Lorie said, "Sure." It was then he said, "God has told me that you and I should get married. It's His will that we become husband and wife!" Lorie was shocked, but then she regained her composure and said to him, "Well, God hasn't told me that same message, so I think we better hold off!"

This story brings to light the difficulties Christians have in knowing and doing the will of God, and it reveals the way in which there are many misconceptions about doing God's will. As we consider the third petition of the Lord's Prayer this morning - "Thy will be done" - I want you to consider three matters: discerning God's will; accepting God's will; and doing God's will.

I. Discerning God's Will.

Over the 30 plus years I've been a pastor, I've been asked many questions about the Bible, theology, and Christian living. But the question I've been asked probably more than any other is this one: How can I know the will of God for my life? If there is anything about which there is confusion among believers today, it is the will of God.

I think it's helpful to divide our thoughts on this subject into two categories: discerning God's general will, and discerning His particular will. God's general, or perceptive, will is plain in Scripture, and there are clear mandates and precepts which God has revealed in the Bible. The Ten Commandments are a good example of this. They reveal the general will of God for all people in all places - that we should have no other gods before Him, that we should not murder or steal, and so forth. We also see examples of His general will in the wisdom literature of Proverbs and in the writings of the prophets in the OT. The NT also contains clear precepts regarding the general will of God for everyone. Take the log out of your own eye, go the extra mile, and do unto others as you would have them do unto you. 1 Thessalonians 4:3 even says, *"It is God's will that you should be sanctified."*

We see that God has given us clear mandates in the Bible we could describe as His general will for all of us. But there is also the matter of His particular will. Questions like Where should I go to college? Who should I date and marry? And what job should I take?

These are all examples of the way in which we need to discern the particular will of God for our individual lives.

When Lorie and I were dating, I was very concerned that I seek the Lord's will before asking her to marry me. So I and prayed, and even fasted, and I asked God to show me what I should do. Before I made the decision to accept the invitation of the Pastor Nominating Committee of this church to candidate to be your senior pastor, Lorie and I spent a great deal of time in prayer, asking the advice of mature believers, and I journaled a lot, all in an effort to discern God's particular will.

Over the years, I have developed a set of 5 questions, that I've shared with you before, which have proven to be helpful to me in seeking to discern God's particular will for my life in making major decisions. They are:

1. What does God's Word say (His expressed will in Scripture)?
2. What does God's Word suggest (in principle by way of guidance)?
3. What does the Holy Spirit confirm (His inward testimony)?
4. What do God's people confirm (the voice of God throughout the centuries, the counsel of brothers and sisters in Christ I respect)?
5. What does my sanctified common sense say? (God has given me a brain, and I should use it in making decisions.)

I have discovered that if I'm diligent in asking these questions, and if I'm honest with the answers I receive - not seeking to rationalize or justify, God has been faithful to reveal His particular will to me in significant ways, and I have clearly sensed His call in the major decisions of my life.

Sometimes the will of God is as plain as the nose on your face - it's a no-brainer. Other times it's confusing, and we need prayer, guidance and the counsel of God's people as we seek to discern His will. But I have found that the passage in Hebrews 11:6 is true when it says, "*...anyone who comes to God must believe that He exists, and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him.*"

II. Accepting God's Will.

The Christian understanding of accepting God's will is different from the resignation of fatalism, or the resignation of Islam and Hinduism. I believe this is one of the problems with Eastern religions. The Muslim looks at a crowded city in the Middle East with its open sewers and disease and says, "It's the will of Allah." The Hindu hopes to escape the pain and tragedy of life and is taught that if there is no desire, then there is no pain. They believe there is greater peace to be found in life when you accept your karma, so the Hindu holy man sits in the dust in resignation.

A. Christian teaching on accepting God's will. But Christianity teaches a very different concept of acceptance in terms of God's will. We believe that acceptance of the will of God is not resignation as much as it is trust - trust that God desires the very best for us, and that He is at work in our lives and in the world through all the circumstances that happen no matter how good and bad they are.

The Lord said through the prophet Jeremiah, *"I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future' (29:11)*. In the context of the Israelites' Babylonian captivity, the prophet Isaiah foretold, *"[But] you will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands' (55:12)*. And Jesus promised His disciples that no matter what happened to them, He would be with them always, even to the end of time (Mt. 28:20).

Accepting God's will means that I desire to do His will above everything else, and I trust the fact that a loving heavenly Father has my best interest at heart. It is a trust that the Lord wants to use whatever happens to me in order to do a good work in me that He might extend His ministry of grace through me. The Greek word that is translated "be done" in the Lord's Prayer is in the passive subjective tense of the verb, which means that it is something that happens to us, not something we do ourselves. In other words, in saying, "Thy will be done," we are asking that God make us a part of His will. It is like falling into a river and being carried along by the current. We are saying, "Lord, Thy will be done, and carry me along with You as You do Your will."

B. Examples of accepting the will of God. We see many examples of this idea of accepting God's will in Scripture. Abraham's offer of his son Isaac in the OT and Mary's response to the angel's announcement in the NT are examples of people trusting God regardless of the circumstances. But the best example of accepting the will of God is Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane in the passage we have read this morning. There we see the way in which our Lord agonized over the reality of what was to come in his impending death by crucifixion, and He still trusted the Father.

Jesus wrestled with the will of God. Three times He asked if it was possible for the cup of death to pass His lips. Three times cried out in anguish and asked that there be another way. Three times He fell prostrate on the ground, sweating drops of blood. But three times He also said, "Nevertheless, not my will by Thine be done." Christ's commitment to accept the Father's will is an example to us all. Whatever the cost, whatever the sacrifice, He wanted to do the will of the Father.

In Jesus we see a contrast to the actions of our first parents in the Garden of Eden. In that first garden they said, "Not your will but mine be done," and they changed paradise into a desert. But in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus said, "Not my will but Yours be done," and He transformed the spiritual desert of this world into the kingdom of God. All because He was willing to accept the will of the Father.

Last summer, our son David had a friend come and visit him here in Austin, and he stayed with us several days. His name is Darrell, and he is a remarkable young man. I don't know if I've ever been around a more positive person than Darrell. The demeanor of his life, the sweetness of his spirit, and just the general way about him spread the aroma of Christ in a way unlike I've experienced it before. All this despite the fact that Darrell is a paraplegic.

When he was in college, Darrell and his best friend were driving back to Colorado from college where he was a track athlete. They were driving I-70 late at night, and Darrell was

sleeping on the back seat of the car without a seatbelt. A deer ran onto the highway, and they swerved to avoid hitting it traveling 70 mph, and a terrible crash ensued. Darrell was thrown from the car through the rear windshield, and his back was broken. He will never walk again.

Darrell acknowledged it was tough at first to accept his disability, and he battled depression. But gradually a change came over his attitude when he decided to be thankful. He realized how fortunate he was to be alive, that he had been air-lifted to one of the best facilities in the country for this kind of injury, and it clarified his priorities and values to discover what really was most important in his life. He realized that his life had been spared for a reason, and he decided to choose to be grateful to God and make the most of his life.

Darrell hasn't let his disability slow him down at all, and Lorie and I marveled at how he could get in and out of a car from his wheel chair, and even go up and down the stairs at our home. He has accepted God's will, and His positive attitude is truly inspirational. Today he's earning a Master's degree in Education at USC, and when he's not teaching he's pursuing a career as the lead singer in a folk band.

Recently, I read the following quote: "What the caterpillar calls the end of the world, the Creator calls a butterfly."ⁱ God has a good plan and purpose for you and me, and He can take even the worst things that happen to us and use them for our good and His glory. Can you trust that truth today and accept God's will for your life?

III. Doing God's Will.

As a young Christian, most of my concern about God's will was very self-directed and personal. Who does God want me to date and marry? What does God want me to do with my life? And why in the world did He make mosquitoes?! But the Lord's Prayer gives us a broader view of things, and it takes the focus off me. Here the question of God's will is seen in a different light, and the Prayer asks a bigger question – What is God's purpose? What is the Lord doing in the world, and how am I called to be a part of it? The doing of God's will is so much bigger than making decisions about my personal life; it also means seeking to be involved in God's work in the world around me.

G. Ashton Oldham has written, "Prayer is the chief agency and activity whereby people align themselves with God's purpose. Prayer does not consist in battering the walls of heaven for personal benefits or the success of our plans. Rather it is the committing of ourselves for the carrying out of His purposes. It is a telephone call to headquarters for orders. It is not bending God's will to ours, but our will to God's. In prayer, we tap vast reservoirs of spiritual power whereby God can find fuller entrance into the hearts of men."ⁱⁱⁱ

The Greek word for "be done" in the Lord's Prayer, and in the story of Jesus in Gethsemane, literally means "to happen." In other words, this petition of the Lord's Prayer is, "Make your will happen, Lord." Bring it about; cause it come to pass. It is a prayer for the working out of God's plan and purpose in the world and in our lives.

For many years I led high school and college students on short-term mission trips to the Dominican Republic and Ecuador. There we would work with the poor and construct

cinder-block church buildings in remote villages. We would also lead vacation bible school for the kids in the barrios and share our faith with the residents there. One of the people who went on several of those trips was a man named Bill McDonald. He headed up a ministry to the poor in Alabama, and he was employed by the mission organization that coordinated our trips.

One day I was talking to Bill and I asked him, "Why is it that doing these kinds of mission trips feels so good, so right?" Bill answered and said, "Pete, I think it's because all too often in our prayer lives back in the States we are trying to get God aligned with our agenda - give me this, God; give me that; but here when we are doing these mission trips and helping the poorest of the poor, we are aligning ourselves with God's agenda." I think Bill was right.

That is what the third petition of the Lord's Prayer is all about. We are praying, "Thy will be done, and may it begin with me." We ask that we might be privileged to be a small part of God's great work of grace and reconciliation. The key to the doing of God's will is to find out what He's already doing in the world and become a part of it.

Conclusion.

In the book, One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich, by Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Ivan endures all the horrors of a Soviet prison camp. One day he is praying with his eyes closed when a fellow prisoner notices him and says with ridicule, "Prayers won't help you get out of here any faster." Opening his eyes, Ivan answers, "I do not pray to get out of prison but to do the will of God."

This is what Jesus earnestly prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, too – "Thy will be done." "Not my will, but Thine be done." Are you and I ready to align our lives with that of the Kingdom of God and the Will of God?

I want to close this morning by praying a prayer together. It is a prayer by Richard Alleine which was used by John Wesley in a Covenant Service of the Methodist Church in 1755. I think it brings into focus what you and I should intend whenever we pray, "Thy will be done."

"I am no longer my own, but Yours, Lord. Put me to what You will, rank me with whom You will; put me to doing, put me to suffering; let me be employed for You or laid aside for You, exalted for You or brought low for You; let me be full, let me be empty; let me have all things, let me have nothing; I freely and heartily yield all things to Your pleasure and disposal. And now, O glorious and blessed God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - You are mine, and I am Yours. So be it. And the Covenant which I have made on earth, let it be ratified in heaven. Amen."ⁱⁱⁱ

ⁱFrom *A Path Through Suffering*, p. 132, by Elisabeth Elliot Gren, published by Vine Books.

ⁱⁱG. Ashton Oldham. Source unknown.

ⁱⁱⁱA Prayer by Richard Alleine used by John Wesley in a Covenant Service of the Methodist Church in 1755.