

"The Doing of God's Will"
Sermon Series on *Lord, Teach Us to Pray* #5
Dr. Peter B. Barnes
October 9, 2016
(Mt. 26:36-46)

Introduction.

When my wife Lorie was in college, and before we met in grad school, she was very 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 everybody.

One day there was a young man who asked if he could talk to her privately. Lorie said, "Well, sure." When they pulled away by themselves he said, "God has told me that you and I should get married. I've been praying about it, and it's His will that we become husband and wife!" Lorie was shocked at the news. They had never even been out on a date. But she quickly regained her composure and said to the young man, "Well, God may have told you that, but He hasn't told me that same message yet. So I think we better hold off on that for a while...in fact, forever!"

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 what it means to do God's will. What did Jesus mean when He taught His disciples to pray in the Lord's Prayer, "Thy will be done?" What can we learn from this petition about knowing and doing the will of God today?

I. Discovering the Will of God.

Usually, whenever people talk about doing God's will, more often than not they're talking about finding out what God wants them to do with their lives. They ask, "How can I know God's will? And what does He want me to do?"

(It might be helpful to divide our thoughts on discovering God's will into two categories: discovering God's *general* will for one's life, and discovering His *particular* will. God's general or preceptive will, as it is sometimes called, is plain in Scripture, and there are many clear mandates and precepts which God has revealed in the Bible. The Ten Commandments are a good example of this. They tell us the general will of God for all people in all places. We should have no other gods before Him, we shouldn't murder or steal or bear false witness, and so on.

There are also many examples in the New Testament in Jesus' teaching in the Gospels and in the writing of the apostles. Take the log out of your own eye, go the extra mile, and do unto others as you would have them do unto you. The

apostle Paul even writes in 1 Thessalonians 4:3, *"It is God's will that you should be sanctified."*

So you can read the Bible to discover God's general will for your life. 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 also need to discover the particular will of God for our individual lives.

Over the years I've developed a set of 5 questions which have proven to be helpful to me in seeking to discover God's particular will for my life whenever I have to make a major decision. Maybe they will help you too. They are:

1. What does God's Word say (His general or preceptive 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 bearing witness to my spirit)?
4. What do God's people confirm (the historic position of the Church down through the centuries, as well as the counsel of brothers and sisters in Christ whom I respect today)? And
5. What does my sanctified common sense say? (God gave me a brain, and I should use it in making decisions.)

I've 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 or spiritualize the matter, God has been faithful to reveal His particular will to me in very significant ways. And I've clearly sensed His call in the major decisions of my life, including His call for Lorie and me to come here to First Pres to become one of your pastors four years ago.

Sometimes the will of God is as plain as the nose on your face – it's a no-brainer. Other times it's pretty confusing. We need prayer, sometimes even fasting, the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and the counsel of godly people as we seek to discover His will. But I have always 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 the Will of God.

While discovering God's will in order to do it is an important task in which every sincere follower of Christ should be engaged, I don't think that really gets to the heart of what this petition in the Lord's Prayer is actually all about. At its core the petition "Thy will be done" is a prayer of acceptance, and it expresses a desire to yield one's life to God.

This phrase in the Lord's Prayer is a parallel statement to the previous one – "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." In this prayer we're asking God to exercise His royal sovereignty and authority over the affairs of this world and the details of our lives. It's really a prayer of relinquishment. It's a prayer of acceptance. It's saying, "Lord, I want Your will to be done in my life and in the world more than I want anything else. Have Your way, Lord. And begin with me."

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

But Christianity teaches a very different concept of acceptance when it comes to the will of God. We believe that acceptance of God's will isn't 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 or bad they may be.

Accepting God's will means that I desire to do His will above everything else, and I trust in the fact that a loving heavenly Father has my best interest at heart. It's a trust that the Lord wants to use whatever happens *to* me in order to do a good work *in* me so 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. That means that it's something that happens to us, not something we do ourselves. In other words, in saying, "Thy will be done," we're asking that God make us a part of His will. It's like falling into a river and being carried along by the current. We're saying, "Lord, Thy will be done, and carry me along with You as You do Your will in the world."

We see many examples of this idea of accepting God's will in Scripture. Abraham's offer of his son Isaac in the Old Testament and Mary's response to the angel's announcement in the New Testament are examples of people trusting God regardless of their circumstances. But the best example of accepting the will of God is Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane in the passage we've read this morning.

There we see the way in which our Lord agonized over the reality of what was to come and His impending death by crucifixion. Yet 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 He cried out in anguish and asked that there be another way. Three times He fell prostrate on the ground and sweat drops of blood. But three times He also said, "Nevertheless, not my will by Thine be done." Jesus' commitment to accept the Father's will is an example to us all. Whatever the cost, whatever the sacrifice, He wanted the Father's will more than anything else.

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 spiritual 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.

Recently, I read the following quote: "What the caterpillar calls the end of the world, the Creator calls a butterfly."¹ God has a good plan and purpose for you and for me, and He can take even the worst things that happen to us in this life 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 the Will of God.

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 of 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 once wrote, "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."²

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

Prayer is, "Make your will happen, Lord." Bring it about; cause it come to pass. It's a prayer for the working out of God's plan and His purpose in the world and in our lives.

How many of you have been to the DR on a mission trip with our church? I was there this past summer with about 50 people from our congregation for the Family Trip, and it was a powerful time.

Back in the day, for many years I led high school and college students on short-term mission trips to the Dominican Republic and Ecuador with Jack Larson with his previous mission organization. Just like what our church does now with Mission Emmanuel, back then 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 people who lived there.

One of the guys 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 Jack's organization to help coordinate 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're trying to get God aligned with our agenda - give me this, God; give me that. But here in the DR when we're doing these mission trips and helping the poor, we're aligning ourselves with God's agenda." I think Bill was right.

This is what the third petition of the Lord's Prayer is all about. We're praying, "Thy will be done, and may it begin with me." We're asking that we might be privileged to be a small part of God's great work of grace and reconciliation in the world. So 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.

One of the greatest theologians of the last century was a man named Reinhold Niebuhr. Of all the brilliant theology he ever wrote, he is probably best known for a little prayer he prayed. As the great theologian was walking into church one Sunday to preach, someone asked him if he would also say a prayer. Niebuhr began to write a few words on the back of his bulletin, and they have become one of the most popular prayers in the world today. But most of us haven't heard the second half of that prayer. And it's the second half that holds the key to the third petition in the Lord's Prayer

God grant me the
Serenity to accept the things I cannot change,
Courage to change the things I can,

And Wisdom to know the difference.
Living one day at a time:
Enjoying one moment at a time;
Accepting hardship as the pathway to peace.
Taking as He did, this sinful world as it is,
Not as I would have it.
Trusting that He will make all things right
If I surrender to His will,
That I may be reasonably happy in this life
And supremely happy with Him forever in the next.
Amen.³

That sounds a lot like, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven,” doesn’t it?

I began my message by telling you a story about Lorie when she was in college. Last month we celebrated our 38th wedding anniversary, and last Sunday marked 40 years since we had our first date. She’s been my partner in life and my partner in ministry for a very long time, and I love her so much. As most of you know, she’s been battling cancer since January 2015, and we’ve been so grateful for all the love, support, and prayers you have given us during this season of challenge. We couldn’t have made it this far without you.

During this time of Lorie’s illness, I’ve thought a lot about the will of God and about prayer. You have joined us in being bold to ask God for Lorie’s complete healing, and we know He can do a miracle. We continue to knock on heaven’s door, and we fervently ask God to put her cancer into remission.

But over and over in recent months, I have come back to this prayer, and I’ve come back to the story of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane. And I’ve been reminded that my highest calling as a follower of Jesus Christ is to want God’s will to be done more than I want anything else, even Lorie’s healing. And if it’s not His will for her to be healed, then I’ve got to trust that He has a bigger purpose and better plan than I can ever see or understand. I know Lorie will eventually be healed, if not in this life then in the next. So I’m going to trust God and pray not only for Lorie’s healing but also that His will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

A song that has come to mean a great deal to me in this season is one I heard a couple of months ago. It's by Hillary Scott. As I close my message this morning, I want you to hear it. I pray that it might speak to you as it has to me. And may God's will be done in all our lives, on earth as it is in heaven. Amen."

¹From *A Path Through Suffering*, p. 132, by Elisabeth Elliot Gren, published by Vine Books.

²G. Ashton Oldham. Source unknown.

³ Cited by Vic Pentz in a sermon he preached in August 2000 at Peachtree Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, GA.