

SEARCHING FOR GOD'S WILL

Jesus teaches us to pray “thy will be done,” but what does that really mean?

D. BRENT LAYTHAM



AS CHRISTIANS, WE PRAY “THY will be done.” These words are rote for some Christians; the will of God is not on their daily agenda. But for others, God’s will is a constant concern—from questions of marriage and career to “should I write an article about the will of God?”

We should care passionately about God’s will. But many North American Christians are far too anxious about knowing God’s will and far too opti-

mistic about doing God’s will. This gets things exactly backwards. Both Scripture and tradition teach that doing is the greater struggle. Not that God’s will is always obvious; but we pray “thy will be done” not “thy will be known.”

God’s will is not finally a question (discernment), but a quest (discipleship). We lose the quest and miss the question because of failures of thought (theology) and practice (spiritual disciplines). I’ll elaborate by surveying three common sayings related to God’s will.

“God willing and the creeks don’t rise.” A friend used to say that phrase whenever we made plans. It implies two things. First, sometimes creeks do rise. People in earlier times depended on nature. They were vulnerable to drought and blight and flood. They also knew that they were vulnerable to the ravages of sin—anger, betrayal, deception, revenge (Matthew 5:21-42). “God willing and the creeks don’t rise” says that we don’t fully plot our life’s story.

Second, it is a reminder that God is

involved; we live within the provident purpose of God. Providence is the Christian belief that God continually works for good (John 5:17); God providently cares for us and for all—even birds (Matthew 6:26). God authors the story of our life with us (remember Joseph in Genesis 45). It is not our task to provide the story's happy ending, but God's.

So only a fool builds a future devoid of "God willing" (Matthew 7:24-27). But isn't it also foolish to assume that God so controls history that whatever happens is God's will? A child dies and the fool says, "We don't know why, but this is God's will." A marriage fractures and the fool says, "God is doing this to teach me something." The folly is ignoring the meaning of "thy will be done." God's will is not yet perfected here, but someday will be—when the kingdom comes (Matthew 6:9-10).

The modern age has been a giant effort to tame the creek, seeking to contain nature and eliminate life's uncertainties. We have become a risk culture that asks technological science and bureaucratic expertise to secure our future and protect our present. From insurance to weather prediction, from seatbelts to stem cells, we live in a culture obsessed with calculating, controlling, and eliminating risk. In a risk culture, Jesus' instruction, "Do not worry about your life" (Matthew 6:25), is nearly impossible. In an age that has never been safer, we have never been more anxious. (And a youth culture oppressed by its own safety turns to extreme sports rather than radical discipleship.)

Risk culture can distort the way we do God's will. Jesus says, "Give to anyone who begs from you," yet I seldom pick up hitchhikers. Jesus says, "Love your enemies," yet we always calculate the danger. Jesus calls us to risk everything (take up your cross) for God's will. But we seek to do God's will within boundaries of acceptable risk.

More subtly, risk culture tinges our desire to know God's will. We seek it as a form of risk management. God

becomes one more expert system to contain life, an infallible manager for life's projects, an omniscient consultant for major decisions and minor details. Of course, it is good to seek God's guidance. But we all too easily seek God's will to secure our lives rather than lay them down. We offer obeisance for protection, making Christ idol rather than Lord. But God is not in the protection racket!

We certainly can't think our way out of this mess. But perhaps we can act our way into God's will. "When you

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give alms . . ." Jesus says (Matthew 6:2). His reference to alms is a reminder that Christians share willingly because care for the poor is always God's will. The early church practiced "works of mercy" by feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger, visiting the sick and prisoners, burying the dead. As we practice works of mercy today, our anxiety is subdued by Christ's peace, our concern is replaced by Christ's courage, our will is conformed to God's will (Micah 6:8).

"Love God and do what you want."

John Calvin did not mean that loving God would automatically make us want the right things. Rather, Calvin knew that we are created for communion with God. This is the deepest hunger of our heart, but it has been so distorted by sin that now we desire the wrong things, or the right things wrongly.

The truth of Calvin's advice is that love has the power to transform us by reshaping our desires. Marriage serves as an example: eighteen years of loving and being loved by my wife has deeply shaped both what I want and who I am. More so the love of God: it transforms (Romans 12:1-2) and empowers us (Philippians 2:1-13) to desire and do God's will.

The difficulty with Calvin's advice

is that he lived long before the distorting power of consumer culture. Our economy thrives by creating insatiable desire. Advertising barrages us daily with new products and new desires. We want more, better, newer, nicer. And we want it now. The market economy informs our desires, but not so that we "delight in the law of the Lord" (Psalm 1:2). Instead it constantly drones that we should purchase our pleasures and grab our desires. The culture of consumption has no use for one who renounced grasping and embraced

emptying (Philippians 2:6-7).

The Christian life is an ongoing—a lifelong—transformation of desire. We are unschooled from certain pleasures and reschooled into God's good pleasure. Coming to delight in that which delights God is not quick or easy. It takes time and work. Feelings of love for God aren't enough. Just as marriage can't be sustained by feelings of romance (or even friendship), neither is discipleship schooled by spiritual sentiment. Both require something deeper—habitual practices of love. In marriage, it's everything from shared intimacy and mutual parenting to household chores and folding the laundry correctly. In discipleship, it's reordering our affections by worship and devotion.

But devotion without discipline will fail to transform Christians sated by artificial pleasures and salivating for manufactured desires. In a consumer culture, how can we avoid baptizing selfish desire in sacred sentiment? By fasting. Jesus invites us to participate in the integrity of disciplined desire ("when you fast . . ." Matthew 6:16).

The early church expanded fasting to include other ascetic practices—dis-

D. Brent Laytham is assistant professor of theology at North Park Theological Seminary.

ciplining desire by temporary denial, reshaping pleasure through experiences of discomfort. Sometimes they went too far: Saint Anthony threw himself naked into a thorn bush to destroy lustful thoughts. But we don't go far enough. Often, in our excessive indulgence, we don't even start. From food to sex to stuff, Christians today can hardly imagine pleasure postponed or desire denied.

More than ever before, Christians need regular fasts—from the media blitz (an hour of silence), from compulsive consumption (a day without shopping), from manufactured entertainment (a week without television).

“I want to be in the center of God’s will.” Such a comment was a staple of weekly testimony meetings when I was growing up. That conjured up for me the image of a giant target with a big red bull’s-eye in the center. That’s where I wanted to be—in the center of God’s will. But what if I missed the center? Was there grace for those who strayed to the periphery? I remember sermons that warned against the tragedy of choosing “God’s second best.” They often suggested that one false turn on God’s road map would forever deny me God’s perfect plan.

There are problems here. First, of course, the suggestion that God manip-

going from Jerusalem into all the world.

From time to time God deals with individuals—for example the stories of Paul in Acts. But God’s will was not a will for Paul alone, but for the redeemed community that Paul was gathering around Christ (2 Corinthians 3-4) and the redeemed cosmos called to reflect its creator’s praise (Romans 8:21). The problem with “I want to be in the center of God’s will” is that only God can be there, for it is God’s will, not ours.

What practice can rescue us from the idolatrous individualism that displaces God with self? Jesus says, “when you pray . . .” (Matthew 6:5). We notice

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But perhaps we should start with regular fasting—intentionally giving up a meal or three for the love of God and not to slim waists or save time.

Only the submission of our desires to God’s purposes through practices of asceticism can finally free us to find our pleasure in God’s pleasure, to direct our hearts toward God’s hopes, to conform our will to God’s will. God’s desire becomes our delight. Fasting is a necessary step on the path of delight because it teaches us patience. Only those who have been freed from the tyranny of desire can truly know the joy of feasting. Joyful patience is a necessary virtue for those who seek to do God’s will in a world that still groans in bondage to sin.

In the movie *Chariots of Fire*, Eric Liddell must explain to his impatient sister why he has postponed mission work in China in order to run on the British Olympic team. He tells her, “I feel God’s pleasure when I run.” So we, too, can learn to feel God’s pleasure rather than our own. Or better yet, as God transforms us through ascetic practices, we will learn to feel God’s pleasure as our own pleasure—a joyful patience. Then truly we can love God and do what we want.

ulates or micro-manages is not biblical. Jesus suggests that our “heavenly Father” wills us food and drink and clothes (Matthew 6:25-34)—in short, the goods of life. He nowhere suggests that God maps our life from birth to death.

Second, it implies that God’s will is a stationary target at which we aim. But God’s will is more like the mighty rushing river of God’s righteousness (Amos 5:24) or the mighty rushing wind of Pentecost (Acts 2). The center of God’s will is not an immobile target at which we aim, but a mighty rushing flow that carries us toward the kingdom.

Finally, and most importantly, it implies that the point of God’s will is a place to be rather than a project to do.

Our struggle is complicated by our context. We live in the most individualistic age in history. We’ve been taught from birth that the most important pronoun is not “you” or “us,” but “I” (and “me” and especially “my”). So it seems obvious that the will of God is an individual will, a plan for me. Yet the New Testament knows nothing of the will of God as personal plan or individual itinerary. Rather, it speaks of God’s will as a kingdom coming from God’s future into our present, or a church

first that Jesus invites us into community. His prayer establishes relation with God—“our Father.” It simultaneously requires community with God’s people—“our Father” not “my Father.” There are no solitary Christians. We pray (and worship) as God’s people, saying, “thy will be done.” The one concrete expression of God’s will for us in the Lord’s Prayer is that we forgive sinners. It is God’s will to forgive us, and God’s will that we become forgiven forgivers. Given our sin—past, present, and future—forgiveness is a necessary expression of God’s will for our life in community. Look between two thieves and see the center of God’s will—the crucified Christ who prays “Father, forgive them.”

God’s will is the peaceful courage of life-giving service, it is the joyful patience of disciplined desire, it is the faithful forgiving of Christian community. Plan within God’s providence, but always include works of mercy. Decide within God’s pleasure, but only in the context of real renunciations. Seek among God’s people, knowing that God’s will is finally to invite all into the forgiven fellowship of the Holy Spirit. And the rest will take care of itself. □