

“The Will of God: Three Things” (1st Thessalonians 5:16-18)

For Your Life in Christ the Third Sunday in Advent

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Saint Paul’s Lutheran Church of Irvine, CA (LC-MS)

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen. Knowing God’s will can in some respects seem like a very tricky thing. When I first received my call to serve as pastor to Saint Paul’s in 1996 -- when we were in Laguna Beach -- I was excited when I realized that I was being given the opportunity to serve alongside an exceptional congregational president in John W. Lottes. He was the president of the Art Institute of Southern California and a truly exceptional Christian leader gifted in the realm of administration. I remember my deliberations about the call back in ’96 and while I knew that parish council leaders had limited tenures, I felt strongly that serving with John during the first few years of my new pastorate would represent a powerful start for my new calling. When I accepted the call I was excited to get to work with John. Not long after arriving to Saint Paul’s, however, our congregation was rocked with the news that John was diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor. I remember living in a state of disbelief: “How could this be?” And the enthusiast in me actually thought surely what I had determined to be the will of God (namely that I would serve with John Lottes) should not be deterred even by cancer. In the early stages of my ministry to John, I prayed for a miracle.

In time it became evident that my brother in the Lord John was dying. No, the Lord did not answer my prayer for exceptional healing (as I understood it at the time) – or affirm that what I believed to be His will was in fact His will – but what the Lord *did* do was generate a different kind of miracle: I saw the Word of Christ permeate John’s heart and he testified to actually growing in his faith during this time. As a matter of fact I witnessed him as becoming radiant in the faith. As weak as his body became, there was no diminishing his spirit. It was amazing to see! His wife Nancy also matured in ways that she did not expect; testifying to the comforting ministry of the church when one of her members is suffering. All her life she had been a giver, but for the first time she allowed others to give and she realized that to accept the love of Christ from others was in itself an invaluable service in the kingdom of God (blessing both those who give and of course the one who receives). God’s will was for a different course, another way...one which at first I did not suspect and did not know. What became apparent was the fundamental lesson about the will of God in individual situations: God always knows what to do and we oftentimes have not a clue.

One of my favorite seminary professors Robert Preus once taught us this about prayer:

1. God always answers the prayers of His children.
2. He usually does not answer them the way we think He should.
3. But He always answers them in the way that is best for us.

So true and the Lord keeps His promise to work all things out for our good (Romans 8:28).

I remember being especially uptight and worried when the first of our eight children was getting ready to go to high school and then later getting ready to go to college. Where should he go? Where would he be safe? Which institution would offer the best environment? What kinds of influences would impact him? What was God's will? What was God's will?!!! He ended up attending a very liberal institution in New Haven, Connecticut! I prayed for him. At that liberal institution, he met the most wonderful young woman (couldn't ask for a better daughter in law; smart as a tack and full of faith in the Lord); and then a few years into his undergraduate studies, my son informed me that he had decided to go to seminary to also become a pastor. God worked through it all even while I had some Christians intimate that we had made the wrong decision sending him to such a liberal environment. But God was in control, not us.

Fast forward and our third child goes to Chicago – and another liberal institution! -- and meets her future husband. Just one interesting caveat: this young man was from Germany and he would return to Germany to continue his studies while preparing to become a pastor in Germany. But the Lord forges us over time: the fact is that I had nothing to worry about. The word for this new situation was our daily prayer to God: "Thy will be done!" And the truth remains: God is in control! My daughter could not be more blessed and I could not have a better son-in-law for her. It was meant to be. God be praised, even if it was not exactly what I had in mind for God and my daughter...but His way is so much better!

But be warned dear Christians, some unfortunately take the beautiful teaching of God's Word and unnecessarily make it complicated beyond words:

One book that I don't recommend to you is entitled, *Finding the Will of God in a Crazy Mixed-Up World*. Here is a quick summary of the book that I'm **not** recommending to you, but making you aware of: God's known will or universal will is different than God's specific will or individual will and it should be our goal to know both so that we may live in the center of God's will. To do this you need to follow a specific roadmap. That roadmap includes following 6 commands so that then you can be in a position to know God's specific will in 3 areas of your life: everything that represents your major decisions, then your moderate decisions, and finally your minor decisions. Now here is where things get really exciting (according to this book): if you practice the 8 additional road signs for making the right decisions about the will of God then you may experience God's individual will for you at the level of God's good will, or if you are more successful, God's acceptable will – or if you do an exceptional job in your spiritual walk – His perfect will in your life. But remember to take into consideration in your preparation to find God's will the 4 temperaments. Depending on

your temperament, you'll need to make unique adjustments in your pursuit for discovering the will of God in your life.

How 'bout that? There are many problems with this approach, but one of them is that it raises a terrible anxiety. First it sets us up for failure. It gives us the sense that we can predict outcomes. William Miller claimed to know the will of God and predicted that Jesus would come again in 1843. He was wrong. Hal Lindsey predicted 1988. He was wrong. Harold Camping predicted May of 2011 and then October of 2011. He was wrong. Tim LaHaye has predicted on or before 2024. What does all of this do for you and me? It raises fear, not faith. And furthermore, it turns your walk with God not about faith, but about following a program that can be fine-tuned and controlled. But what if you aren't doing it right? What if you mess up on your calculations? What if? What if? What if? And in the end the spirit is exhausted and the mind is confused...and the poor soul who has completely mistaken the will of God begins to blame God and often abandon faith (or at least their false understanding of faith).

Where will you be in 5 or 10 years?

Where will your kids go to school?

How will your marriage mature?

What will your health be like?

Where will you be living?

We all know the answer: we don't know. But what we do know is that our gracious Lord Jesus Christ is in control and His plan is – always – to bless His children and often in ways that we do not expect.

You've heard of the K.I.S.S. principle right? It means "Keep It Simple Studious [One]." Don't follow the mazes and complications of those who only appear to be spiritual and religious. Stick to the Word of Christ! The good news is that God doesn't expect us to get our heads spinning when it comes to "knowing His will" and trying to peer into the future! ***His will for us is clear and direct; and it is much more focused on what really counts.***

The Christians in Thessalonica had some major issues:

1. They were so in tune to the imminent coming of Jesus Christ that they were worried about what would happen to their loved ones who had died. Christ was coming, but what about those no longer with them? How would they be included in the coming of the Lord?
2. The second issue was much more practical: because they were so transfixed on the future, they were "checking out" of today, they were losing their focus on their immediate call and vocations; they

were forsaking their responsibilities and they were letting go of their daily duties. So St. Paul wrote 1st Thessalonians to lead them to get back on course and in so doing the Lord taught them about His will.

Part I: So Let's Major in Majors When it Comes to the Will of God

- A. What does God *really* want you to do? Now I know if you're a Raider fan like I am, this will be hard to believe: But God doesn't care about whether you root for the Oakland Raiders or the Green Bay Packers; He is actually fine with whatever you decide to have for lunch today; and He really isn't that worried about your next business move (because if it doesn't work out, He will still have your back)! He has more fundamental things on His mind when it comes to His will for you. ***And when we focus on what is really His will, then everything else has a way of panning out!***
- B. He calmed the Thessalonians by revealing the simplicity of His will and gave them (and us) three little basic things that flow from our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.
- C. And here my dear brothers and sisters in Christ ***is the will of God for your life! [the Greek has no definite article, so this includes God's will, but is not exhaustive of it]***

1st Thessalonians 5:16-18: "Rejoice always, ¹⁷pray without ceasing, ¹⁸give thanks in all circumstances; *for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.*"

- D. The first little thing is "rejoice always." This must be one of those places in the Bible where critics want to say that the Bible contradicts itself. Didn't Jesus teach in the Beatitudes – Matthew 5:4 – ***"blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."***? Well of course He did. This, however, is not a contradiction but an explanation:
 - 1. The constant joy of the Christian is not "natural joy" that comes from what is perceived as a good change in circumstances. That kind of joy is when the game show host says, "You've won a new car!" and the music comes on and the winner starts to jump up and down. This is the kind of joy our pug George knows every time my wife asks him if he wants to take a car ride!
 - 2. The joy of faith, however, is "supernatural" or Christ-oriented joy. It is racially different. It is the joy that applies faith to all circumstances and says:
 - a. The Lord is with me and will not forsake me.
 - b. And no matter how much difficulty my circumstances cause me, do you know what? God has made a promise to me: He is going to work things out for my good! Guaranteed! God says, "You know how you can be sure?" Think of Christ who says, "I love you this much!" [pastor will spread out his arms to remind us of His cross which saved us]
 - c. This is a different joy. It is a confidence that God is blessing us even through adversity. Look at the example of Saint Paul:

Acts 16:25: "About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God."

- d. ***Do you remember the context here? Paul had just been attacked, had his clothes torn off, had been beaten with rods, was thrown into prison, and had stocks put on his feet! Now please go back and read Acts 16:25 one more time! [repeat Acts 16:25]***
 - e. ***Paul knew that the Lord would not forsake him and that he would bless him no matter what!***

- E. The second little thing of God's will is "pray without ceasing."

1. This one gets all kinds of bad press. Even Christians read this and say, “OK, God is just being unrealistic here! How can we pray ‘without ceasing’?!” Hold on a minute! The word here is *prosklisis* and it does not mean -- in this instance -- formal prayers.
2. *It means “a leaning towards,” it is a constant consciousness that you need God! It is a constant awareness that the Lord is with you and loves you. This prayer is indeed “without ceasing.” This kind of faith is God’s will for you!*

F. The third little thing of God’s will is “give thanks in all circumstances.” It is directly related to everything we’ve already said. This thanksgiving epitomizes faith in Jesus Christ. You develop the eyes of faith. Notice how vs. 18 ends ***“in Christ Jesus”...well to be “in Christ” means truly that whatever you face and yes, sometimes it’s really bad stuff...but whatever it is, He leads you! With sins forgiven, you rejoice, pray, and give thanks!***

Part II And these three are never in isolation but they flow from the most important thing in your life: the eternal love of God in Jesus that has rescued you from the disaster of evil and death. Jesus has saved you and it’s amazing in that it is all because HE was the One who really knew and kept the will of God. But He didn’t do it for Himself...no He didn’t even have to come. He was and is God. He was already perfect, but He came for you. Jesus came for you.

And when He did, He prayed at the Garden of Gethsemane: ***“My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will...My Father; if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done.”*** (Matt. 26:39, 42; cf. Mark 14:36; Luke 22:42)

There was only one way that you dear Christian would ever know the beauty and simplicity of seeking God’s will flowing from the heart of faith: the way was for Christ to open heaven for you, to take the punishment for all sin, to shed His blood so that the blood of God would take death by surprise and conquer even it. Your Savior was more than determined that nothing would take away your ability as a child of God to rejoice always, to pray always, to give thanks always, because Jesus said about His mission to save us: ***“My food is to do the will of him who sent me.”*** (John 4:34) And God’s great will that is greater than anything is: ***“God our Savior wills all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.”*** (1st Timothy 2:3-4) And ***“The Lord does not will anyone to perish but that everyone might come to repentance.”*** (2nd Peter 3:9)

And this is our repentance: we turn from all the times when we tried to make the will of God our will, when we refused to pray, “Thy will be done,” when we refused to trust; when we insisted on making God’s will so complicated that it was just our way of giving ourselves all the glory...we turn from this in repentance and instead we turn to Jesus who rejoices over you (you are His redeemed and saved child); who prays for you always (interceding for you at the right hand of God); and who gives thanks for you (that you now belong to Him) having made you holy and without blemish through His washing you like He has washed Harper Grace today...rejoice dear Christian, this is God’s will for you: that you would be saved! And you are so let us rejoice, pray, and give thanks!