

Sermon 29, Pray Like This, Pt. 4: Knowing God's Will, Matthew 6:10b

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Proposition: Knowing God's will is a matter of obeying His revealed will, not of guessing His plan for history and your life!

We all want to know God's will. Where should I live? What should I eat for breakfast? What car should I buy? Should I attend this college or that college, marry this girl or that girl, buy Coke or Pepsi? The questions are endless; we stand every moment at the top of an endlessly branching tree of possibilities; the tiniest babies among us are confronted with the opportunity to choose, second-by-second, what sort of life they will craft for themselves.

Thus, finding the will of God has grown into a big industry in the church. And I firmly believe that you simply cannot pray for God's will to be done unless you have some idea of what you're praying. I think we all agree that praying the Lord's Prayer is a good thing. We all agree that these requests are good requests. But how many of us have much concept of the will of God? I hope you can quote Romans 12 and tell me that God's will is good, pleasing, and perfect. That's true. But it doesn't really tell us what God's will is, or how we can partner with it. After all, as we saw a few weeks ago, that's what this petition is really about. We need to partner with God, seeking the accomplishment of His will. But what is His will? Well, for our practical purposes, God's will is His revealed moral commands about what's right and what's wrong. To know God's will, you need look no further than the Ten Commandments and the other moral exhortations given in Scripture. The rest of this sermon will show you why that's the case.

I. God's Will: His Faculty of Choice, Gal. 1:4

God's will is fundamentally His ability to choose. It is a faculty of the divine nature. All three Persons of the Trinity share one will. Just as you have a will, by which you choose what you will do from moment to moment, so God has a will, by which He chooses what He will do — not from moment to moment, but from all eternity. How do we know that God has a will? Well, we can see its results all around us. The fact that Gillette is here, that Wyoming is here, that you are here and that I am here, are all signs that God chose to create this Earth and the people on it. But

again, since the will is the faculty of choice, God could not have chosen to do such a thing unless He had a will.

Further, we know that He has a will because the Bible tells us so. Paul mentions this will in Galatians 1:4, speaking of Jesus, "who gave Himself for our sins, that He might deliver us from this present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father" (Gal 1:4 NKJ). It was God's choice that Jesus come and die. It wasn't your idea or my idea; we didn't get together to petition God to rescue us from sin at the cost of His Son. He voluntarily did it. He did it of His own free will, and Christ submitted to be given of His own free will.

Now notice, right up front, that when you ask for God's will to be done, you are asking for God to continue being His glorious self. The kind of thing He does with His will is figure out a way to rescue you and me from sin. He chose a way at great cost to Himself to save us at no cost to us. He didn't have to do that. He wanted to do it. He did it for pure love.

Can you ask God to do His will, knowing how good His will is? His will is always good, pleasing, and perfect. No wonder Jesus taught us to pray for God's will to be done!

However, though "will" in general is simply God's faculty of choice, nonetheless, it is too big for our minds to understand it all under one umbrella heading of "faculty of choice." We need to understand the distinction within God's will. This is not a real distinction; that is, God doesn't actually have two wills. This is simply a mental distinction, made to help us understand both kinds of things that God does with His will.

A. His Plan for History, or Decretive Will, Eph. 1:11

The first thing He does with His will, according to our way of understanding, is to plan out history. God determined everything that would happen, and He ensures that it happens exactly as He planned. Paul describes this as "the purpose of Him who works all things according to the counsel of His will" (Eph 1:11 NKJ). God's will advises Him on what He should do, and He does what His will deems best. God's will can't be separated from His mind or judgment; in God, all three are the same thing. We simply use different terms to understand what in God is one and the same thing.

Everything that has happened or ever will happen is God's will in this sense. All things are worked after the counsel of His will. The text doesn't say "most things," or "everything but the free actions of rational creatures," or "everything but evil." Obviously, God doesn't personally do evil. He doesn't make anyone do evil. But nonetheless, the existence of evil is in some sense according to the counsel of His will because He works *all things* after the counsel of His will. That includes evil. Evil should not be, but God allows it to be. He permits us to be evil. He does not fail to control history; evil is not something more powerful than God. No, God rules evil too, and He will put a full stop to it someday. But for now, it is present, and it is present according to the role and place God assigned to it. Just as Shakespeare created murderers but was not personally guilty of murder, so God creates murderers but is not personally guilty of murder. How can that be? It is something about the process of creation. We don't know exactly how it

works. But we trust both that God cannot do evil or tempt anyone to evil, and that He works all things after the counsel of His own will.

B. His Moral Demands, or Moral Will, Eph. 5:17

But in addition to God's plan for history, known to theologians as the "decretive will," God's will has another facet. This facet is the "moral will," or "preceptive will." This is what God wants us to do. These are His moral demands. Paul commands us to know what God's will is in a chapter rife with moral instruction: "Therefore do not be unwise, but understand what the will of the Lord is" (Eph 5:17 NKJ). The whole assumption here is that you can understand what God's will is: it's what Paul has been telling you and is going to continue telling you. It's God's will that you redeem the time. It's God's will that husbands love their wives and employees obey their bosses. It's God's will that you do the right thing every time.

But when Paul tells us to know what God's will is, does he mean — can he mean — that we understand God's plan for history in all its fullness?

Do you ever think in those terms? Do you ever ask yourself why the red SUV with Minnesota plates was pulled up next to you at the stoplight last Tuesday afternoon at 4:30? Do you ever think about why a particular antelope was in your yard, or why the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria is an enemy far more formidable than al-Qaeda ever was?

Maybe. Maybe not. Only certain kinds of people are inclined to think in those terms. But the fact of the matter is, God knows the answer to every one of those questions. He knows why there was a red SUV from Minnesota in town, and why it was next to you at the stop light, and why He chose to put it next to you for that moment. He knows. It's no mystery to Him.

But He's not telling.

II. You Can Only Know God's Decretive Will After the Fact, Deut. 29:29

Indeed, you can only know God's decrees after the fact. If I had asked you at this time last year who the 2016 presidential candidates would be, you would not have known. But God knew. If I had asked any of you in 1995 what the population of Gillette would be in 2016, you would not have known. But God knew. These are all things that He knows because He set them up. God chose the way everything would be before it ever happened; He supervises and guides all events, controlling everything according to all-wise providence and all-knowing wisdom. But He doesn't tell in advance. You and I do not have access to information about the world in 2031, or about the world in 2031 B.C. for that matter — and yet God knows it all. He has His secrets, and He has certain things He has told us. Moses understood this: "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law" (Deu 29:29 NKJ). Did you catch that? God has secret things! God has things He won't reveal until they actually happen. But He has also revealed certain things, and He's revealed them for a particular purpose. What is that purpose? That's right: so you can obey His law.

III. You Can Know God's Moral Will Right Now

You can't obey the law unless you know what it is. That, brothers and sisters, is the bottom line. When you think about how to know God's will, you should change the question. Don't say, "How can I know God's will?" Say, "How can I know God's law?"

That's what God has revealed. That's what God has told us concerning His will. He has told us His moral will, and another name for the moral will of God is His law.

A. God's Word Tells Us His Will, 1 Thess. 4:3; 1 Pet. 2:15

Think about two places in the New Testament where Peter and Paul tell us what God's will for our lives is.

- For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality; (1Th 4:3 NKJ)
- For this is the will of God, that by doing good you may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men-- (1Pe 2:15 NKJ)

So — what is God's will for your life? God's will is His law. God's will is that stop engaging in sexual immorality! Whether that's making coarse jokes, watching people on TV make coarse jokes, entertaining lustful thoughts, looking at lust-inducing pictures and videos, or actually carrying on an extra-marital affair or having pre-marital sexual intercourse with your boyfriend, God's will is that you stop it. God's will is that you live chastely. God's will is that you confess your sin and run away from it.

If you're around evil people and fools who mock your Christian faith, God's will is that you be so full of goodness that it shuts them up. God's will is that your life show people that being good is possible, and that it is not to be mocked. God's will is that you obey every one of His commandments so that fools stop mocking!

Well, it is absurd to say, "Oh, it's God's will for me to keep the seventh commandment, but He doesn't care about the eighth." God's will, in fact, is for you to keep all His commandments. He wants to obey Ephesians 5:17 and Ephesians 5:18. You can't pick and choose; you can't tell God what you'll do and what you won't do. It's all God's will; everything He commands you is His will for your life.

B. God's Ten Commandments Tell Us His Will, Ex. 20:1-17

In fact, the clearest teaching on God's will is found in the Ten Commandments. What does God want you to do? He wants you to have no other gods! He wants you to worship Him exactly as He prescribes, and in no other way. He wants you to respect and honor His name. He wants you keep holy the specific times He's instructed you to keep holy, especially the weekly Sabbath day. He wants you to honor your parents. He wants you to stop hating and murdering. He wants you to preserve your own and your neighbor's chastity. He wants you to preserve your own and your neighbor's property. He wants you to love truth and tell the truth. He wants you to be content with what you have.

This is God's will for your life. His will for your life is that you obey His law. *But, but, but*, you may be thinking, *how am I supposed to know who to marry?* God's will is that you obey

His commands. What are His commands? Marry only a believer. Marry someone who will help you walk with God. Beyond that, the choice is yours. If you know 8 girls who would be equally suited to helping you walk with God, then choose based on additional factors. Maybe one is healthy and the others are sickly; maybe one has parents that live closer to where you will be living. And so on. But the dirty little secret here is that *the person you're supposed to marry is part of God's decretive will, not His moral will!* You can sin and marry an unbeliever — but you can't "get out of the center of God's will" by "choosing His second-best choice." That's baloney! Nowhere does the Bible say or suggest that you're supposed to *guess* at God's will. God has told you things you must do. His guidelines are totally inflexible, but they are clear. Do you want me to repeat all ten of them?

If something is not directly a moral issue — if it's not something directly addressed by a command in Scripture — then God's will is that you make a decision. God wants you to choose based on the best information you have and the best criteria you have to evaluate it. Yes, He tells us to use counselors. Yes, He tells us to pray and submit to Him. But ultimately, if it's a question of whether to have an affair with Yvonne or Ingrid, God says "Neither!" If it's a question of whether to bank at Bank of the West or Citibank, God says, "Make an informed decision." God forbids affairs. He forbids banking with people you know will steal your money. But if the action is morally neutral, then you have to decide.

IV. Asking God to Make Your Decisions for You Is False Piety, John 16:14

So, you might ask, what about those verses that tell us to walk by the Spirit and keep in step with the Spirit? Doesn't the Spirit give us little nudges and hints? Doesn't He give us inner peace if we're making the right choice, or leave us without "a peace about it" if we're making the wrong choice?

Brothers and sisters, I know that question is well meant. I know that many good Christian people talk that way and think that way and live that way. But the problem is that the Spirit is never described as making our decisions for us or giving us "a peace about it" when we make the right choice! Where does it say that David had a real peace about when he decided to write Psalm 18? Where does it say that Paul had a real peace about it when he decided that he was going to go to Jerusalem no matter what? Where does it say that we can expect inner peace from the Spirit when we're in the center of God's will? Nowhere! The Bible says nothing of the sort. Instead, it tells us what the Holy Spirit does. Don't get me wrong; I know Reformed Presbyterians are sometimes accused of neglecting the Holy Spirit. But I fully believe in His role in guiding me into the will of God. The Spirit tells us things from only one source: Jesus. He only reveals to us things about Jesus. Everything the real Holy Spirit tells you is something that He got from one person: Jesus. These aren't things about you; these are things about Jesus! "He will glorify Me, for He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you" (Joh 16:14 NKJ). Everything the Spirit tells you is something designed to glorify Jesus. Everything the Spirit passes on is something He originally heard from Jesus. Everything that comes from the Spirit is,

therefore, something about Jesus! Earlier in that chapter, we see that the Spirit convicts the world of its relationship to Jesus based on truths about Jesus.

In other words, the Holy Spirit is not in the business of telling you things about you! The Spirit tells you about *Jesus*. If what you heard is “Marry Susie,” is that about Jesus? No! That’s about you.

Don’t ask God to make your decisions for you. Don’t believe that He will tell you whether to take the right or left turn when traveling from your house to church. Does He help us like that sometimes, when we’re lost? Of course. But do we plan on it? Do we say, “I don’t need to find out where Walmart is because God will provide my daily bread!” “I don’t need to research colleges, because I know that God is telling me to go to the University of such-and-such!” Really? Is that about Jesus? Because the Spirit only tells you about Jesus. He doesn’t take your things and reveal them to you; He takes *from Jesus* and reveals those things about Jesus to you.

V. Praying for God’s Will Without Learning God’s Commands Is Hypocrisy!

So, brothers and sisters, knowing God’s will is a matter of learning His law. Can you recite the Ten Commandments? Do you know what is required of Christians? When you’re at work and tempted to take home office supplies, do you know what a Christian ought to do? When you’re in a hotel room across the country from anyone you know, do you know how a Christian ought to handle his remote control? When you’re sitting on the couch after a hard day’s work and your child asks to play with you for the umpteenth time, do you know how a Christian dad ought to react?

Look. If you pray “Thy will be done” but don’t know what God’s moral will is, then you’re a hypocrite. You’re not actually interested in making sure that God’s moral will happens; you’re simply mouthing words that seem to be good words to say, without actually caring whether God’s will is done.

Brothers and sisters, God’s will sent Jesus to die because of your sins. God’s will is for you to stop sinning by the power of Jesus’ resurrection, applied to you by the Holy Spirit. God’s will is that you make your own decisions, not looking for an illusory “inner peace” but based on hard facts. Many pastors have had men tell them, “I know it’s God’s will for me to be having this affair with Mary Jo, because we both have such peace about it.”

Baloney! But of course, if inner peace were the measure of God’s will, then such a ludicrous statement would be true. But God’s will is not based on your feelings; God’s will was carved in stone on Mount Sinai. God’s will is written now in the book you have in your lap. Do you want His will done? Then learn what it is. Next week, we’ll talk about obeying what you know. But this week, rejoice that Jesus has sent the Spirit to teach you His will. Start listening to what the Spirit is saying by listening to what He said, in the book you have in front of you. I promise that the will of God you’ll find written there is good, pleasing, and perfect. So pay attention to it. Amen.