

Matthew 6:10  
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Hampton Baptist  
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*Sermon Series on The Lord's Prayer*

"What Is God's Will For My Life?"

As a college student, I wrestled with many of life's important questions. It was a time when my values were becoming *my* values. Up to that point, I had accepted what I had been taught and never questioned its veracity. But a component of the maturation process is for a person to be able to think for themselves, reason for themselves. I retained most of the virtues and attributes of my childhood, but also realized that some of what I was taught was somewhat shady in my mind.

One of my biggest concerns as a college student regarded my future and the question for which I wanted a resolute answer was, "What is God's will for my life? What exactly does God want me to do? What does God want my major to be? What vocation does God want me to pursue?" I had always been taught that God had a perfect plan for my life, and it was left up to *me* to discern the will of God. I understood God's will to be a *plan*, a pre-determined course which I should follow, including whom to marry, what career to pursue, where to live, etc.

Many of you know that I served as a Campus Minister Intern at Virginia Tech as part of my seminary education. The daily interactions with the college students provided hearty discussions on heavy spiritual matters. One of the most popular discussions centered on this question "What is God's will for my life?" I would share with them my personal struggle with that question and how I believed that God's will was a *purpose* and not a *plan*.

I believe that God has distinctly given the same mandate to all of us. God would *will* for everyone to follow Jesus; that is God's foremost desire, yet God simply will not invade someone's heart without an invitation. The second element is to help further the Kingdom of God; be a disciple of Jesus; retrace the footsteps of Jesus; follow him.

When Jesus prayed "Thy Kingdom come," he followed the phrase with "Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." The work of the Kingdom is directly connected to God's will. In Matthew 7:21, a later passage of "The Sermon on the Mount," Jesus said, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven; but he who does the will of my Father who is in Heaven." Jesus made it quite clear that we are to *do* the will of the Father; we are to seek to please God.

Many of the students at Virginia Tech had the same notion that God had a pre-determined path, and if we did not follow the exact path, then God would not be pleased. Or even worse, that God would do something *mean* to us, like zapping us back onto the path.

A basic definition of God's will is anything that *pleases* God. It is health not disease; purity not lust; service not selfishness; giving not grabbing; love and not hate; the Golden Rule and not the one who *has* the gold *makes* the rules. If we know God, if we have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, if we are seeking to be true disciples, then we will *know* what God's will is. We will open our Bibles, and we will read how God wants us to act...and think...and talk. We will follow the example of Jesus. We will submit in obedience to do what is good, what is right, what is merciful, and what is gracious.

Jesus said that people would be known by their fruits or their deeds. In doing God's will, we will be known by *our* fruits of the spirit, namely love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. In actuality, we *know* what God's will is for our lives; we

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know what God wants us to do, but we spin our wheels at times wondering, thinking, pondering about what God's will *truly* is.

Yet many will lean on this question, "What is God's will for my life?" in seeking to determine vocational objective or other important decisions. The followers of Islam believe that these kind of important decisions have already been made and are written down in a book kept by Allah, their God. Objectively speaking, those who believe like this are abdicating their responsibilities as humans. Jean Paul Sartre, a French existentialist philosopher, calls this premise "bad faith." Sartre contends that putting the obligation to make the decisions that define the meaning and purpose of our lives onto some transcendental "Totally-other being-in-the-sky" is to reduce ourselves to puppets.

We are not marionettes with God pulling our strings making us do certain things. God has given each of us brains to make decisions. Frankly, I don't think God cares if we choose to work at McDonalds or Surfrider; what God *does* ask is that in everything, we do our best as unto God. Yet some still think that God has a specific design for our lives. It would certainly be easier that way. Some may even be a bit relieved to find ourselves freed from the responsibility of decision-making that goes with being human.

Maybe the biggest problem in the idea of "What is God's will for my life?" is that this approach tends to immobilize well-meaning Christians. I know there are some people that say that God has told them \_\_\_\_\_. I do not doubt that God speaks directly to some people in that manner; to question the validity of God's communication with someone puts me in the seat of a judge. That is not the place for me. But I do know also that most of my Christian friends have never heard God speak to them audibly. Maybe most of us have never heard God call us by name and demand that we do something specific. We sense God's presence, and we know God's guidance through the Bible, through experiences, through Christian friends and even through nature. Yet the majority of us will not audibly hear God telling us specifically to do *something* over another *something*.

Lest I be misunderstood, I am not advocating that God has left every individual alone to create his or her own meaning in life. But I also do not believe that God dictates to every sincere, seeking Christian some specific plan laid down before the foundation of the world. Instead, I contend that God walks with us every day and helps us discern what we should do at that particular moment. God did not *will* the tragic events of September 11, 2001; God did not orchestrate the Holocaust. God does not *will* other evils in our world. But God *can* work in the midst of these tragedies to bring about something good. God *can* bring hope to victims of natural disaster. God *can* bring peace to those who suffer from cancer, although it is not God's will that *anyone* suffer.

On the subject of God's will for our lives, Tony Campolo writes, "I find that life for most of us is a constant struggle in which we never stop considering what it is that we should become. In dialogue with God, we need to establish what we believe are viable missions and then set out to achieve them...We must be constantly into the Scripture and into prayer, which are essential disciplines for developing a sensitivity to the presence of God in our everyday lives." (Tony Campolo. Carpe Diem. Dallas: Word Publishing, 1994. p. 104)

It is a shame that many utilize the phrase "Thy will be done" as a pious cry of resignation--of Christian *fatalism*. Some would say that God's will is going to be done *regardless*, because God is sovereign and is in control of the universe.

I agree that God is sovereign and that God is ultimately in control of the affairs of our universe. But my definition of sovereignty does not include the fact that everything that *happens* is God's will. God certainly allows injustices to occur, but I certainly do not believe that God is the *author* of pain and suffering.

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Yet there are times when following God's will may bring pain. Many times the easiest path, the path of least resistance, is *not* the will of God. There are times when what *we* want and what *God* wants are the same. During those times, it is easy to do God's will. But sometimes *our* will is *opposed* to God's will. Sometimes what *we* want is something that God does not want *us* to have.

Every day we need to ask ourselves if *our* will and *God's* will are the same. Is what we want the same as what God *knows* is best for us? Are our life goals synonymous with what God desires? Will the greater good for the cause of Christ be gained by doing what *we* want or by doing what *God* wants? These are tough questions, but every time we pray "Thy will be done," we are requesting that God's purposes rise above our own. We are petitioning God to help us follow Christ's footsteps.

Jesus' life was a pure *prism* of God. We all know what a prism is. It is a triangulated piece of glass that breaks down light into the colors of the rainbow. Jesus' life *refracted* the many qualities of God's character. Yet even for Jesus, doing God's will wasn't always easy. Jesus' days in Galilee, where he spent the majority of his public ministry, were *good* days. Those were days when *God's* will and *Jesus'* will were twain; they were the same. But the night before he died, after the Lord's Supper, after the prediction of Peter's betrayal, Jesus found himself in the Garden of Gethsemane. He took Peter, James and John into the Garden; he paused to pray for his will was not the same as God's will. Matthew 26:39-42 reads, "Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Could you men not keep watch with me for one hour?" he asked Peter. "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the body is weak." He went away a second time and prayed, "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done."

Jesus was faced with a choice, a major decision. His disciples had failed him; the very people he came to save, the Jews, had become selfish, cowardly and angry toward him, because he was not the kind of Messiah they wanted; his closest friends were sleeping despite his agony. This was the lowest point of Jesus' life, yet he also knew that the end was in sight. Ahead of him was the crucifixion on a cross, a most painful death.

We simply cannot fathom his sorrow, nor comprehend his agony, nor realize the extent of his personal trial. Being the Son of God, he certainly had the power to save himself from the impending doom. He could have taken the easy road and not gone to the cross. But he knew that if he saved *himself*, he would have followed the self-centered principle modeled by the world. Under the supreme test, he committed himself to the way of self-denial and self-sacrifice and rejected the way of self-preservation.

The submission of *His* will to the will of *God* was the supreme victory at Gethsemane. In the Model Prayer, when Jesus shared with the disciples, the phrase "Thy will be done," he was teaching others to pray what he and all of us need to practice. In Gethsemane, Jesus had no doubt that all things were possible; he could have sought another route. But he knew that following through to the cross was God's will. And out of his suffering came his triumph and glory.

How about you and me? Are there times when our will and God's will do not coincide? Are there times when you know the right thing to do but do something else instead? Are there times that you know what God's will is, yet refuse to do it? It's easy to follow God's will when what God wants and what you want are the same thing. The true test of a disciple of Jesus is when your will is not the same as God's will, and you *choose* to do what God desires.

During those times, let us pray earnestly, "Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."