

DISCOVERING GOD'S WILL (19)
“THE BATTLE TO DO GOD'S WILL”
- Saying One Thing and Doing Another -
Sermon 11/04/18

For several months we have been on a journey to discover God's will. The last time we spoke we looked at why God appears to be silent at times and unresponsive to our prayers. Today I want to look at an example of delayed prayer and the possible explanation for it. From that example I will start us on a journey to discover why we battle against doing God's will even when we know explicitly what it is. We'll start by looking at the book of Jeremiah. But first let me set the stage.

Jeremiah was a prophet called by God at a very young age to prophesy against the inhabitants of Israel for the many sins which they had committed. He started out by warning the people to repent in order to avoid exile to Babylon but the people rejected God's call to repentance and instead continued to sin. His message then changed to speak of God's impending judgment against both Israel and Judah and how the Babylonian army led by King Nebuchadnezzar would utterly destroy the city and the temple of Jerusalem and take the people captive to Babylon.

Jeremiah prophesied for 41 years until Jerusalem was finally conquered by the Babylonian army in 586 BC. Through his messages God encouraged the leaders and the people to surrender to the king of Babylon so their lives would be spared. As a result Nebuchadnezzar looked with favor upon Jeremiah and had the captain of his army grant Jeremiah permission to stay, if he so desired, with the remnant of Judah under the leadership of Gedaliah whom Nebuchadnezzar had set up as governor of the land. Unfortunately a group of guerilla leaders killed Gedaliah and all the Judean and Babylonian soldiers who were with him. Afraid of what the Babylonians might do when they heard what they had done the guerilla leaders and all the people, from the least to the greatest, approached Jeremiah and said the following:

JEREMIAH 42: 2-6 (NLT)

“Please pray to the Lord your God for us. As you can see, we are only a tiny remnant compared to what we were before. Pray that the Lord your God will show us what to do and where to go.”

“All right,” Jeremiah replied. “I will pray to the Lord your God, as you have asked, and I will tell you everything He says. I will hide nothing from you.”

Then they said to Jeremiah, “May the Lord your God be a faithful witness against us if we refuse to obey whatever He tells us to do! Whether we like it or not, we will obey the Lord our God to whom we are sending you with our plea. For if we obey Him, everything will turn out well for us.”

These people were asking for God's direction and seemed willing to do whatever God says to do whether they like His answer or not. One can hardly find fault with that type of surrendered prayer. Taking them at their word Jeremiah then approached the Lord with their petition. He asked God to tell him what these people were to do and where they should go. The Scripture then says, *“Ten days later the Lord gave His reply to Jeremiah”* (Jeremiah 42:7).

Here is an example of a delayed answer to prayer. Even though ten days does not seem like a long time when some of us have waited years for answers to our prayers it is nonetheless significant that God's answer was delayed by ten days. Why do I say that? Because something was happening during those ten days that is best explained by going back to the Scriptures.

JEREMIAH 42:7-17 (NLT)

“Ten days later the Lord gave His reply to Jeremiah. So he called for... the...guerilla leaders, and for all the people, from the least to the greatest. He said to them, “You sent me to the Lord, the God of Israel, with your request. And this is His reply: ‘Stay here in this land. If you do, I will build you up and not tear you down; I will plant you and not uproot you...Do not fear the king of Babylon anymore,’ says the Lord, ‘For I am with you and will save you and rescue you from his power. I will be merciful to you by making him kind, so he will let you stay here in your land.’

“But if you refuse to obey the Lord your God, and if you say, ‘We will not stay here; instead we will go to Egypt where we will be free from war, the call to arms, and hunger,’ then hear the Lord’s message to the remnant of Judah. This is what the Lord of Heaven’s Armies, the God of Israel, says: ‘If you are determined to go to Egypt and live there, the very war and famine you fear will catch up to you, and you will die there. That is the fate awaiting every one of you who insists on going to live in Egypt. Yes, you will die from war, famine, and disease. None of you will escape the disaster I will bring upon you there.’

Let's pause here for a moment. The people asked Jeremiah for God's direction as to whether they should stay in Judah or go somewhere else. God has just given them His answer – they are to stay in Judah. Why then is God now telling them what awaits them if they decide to go to Egypt? Didn't the people say they would do whatever God said whether they liked it or not? Why then is God warning them against going to Egypt? Let's read on and find out.

JEREMIAH 42:18-22 (NLT)

“Listen, you remnant of Judah. The Lord has told you: ‘Do not go to Egypt!’ Don't forget His warning I have given you today. For you were not being honest when you sent me to pray to the Lord your God for you. You said, ‘Just tell us what the Lord our God says, and we will do it!’ And today I have told you exactly what He said, but you will not obey the Lord your God any better now than you have in the past. So you can be sure that you will die from war, famine, and disease in Egypt, where you insist on going.”

The leaders of Judah had said whether they liked God's answer or not they would obey because they knew if they obeyed the word of the Lord that everything would turn out well for them. But Jeremiah had very grave doubts about the people's response to what he has just said. He firmly believed they would not do what the Lord had told them to do. Was he right? What was the response of the people to Jeremiah's message? Did they say, “Great! Now we know what to do. We'll stay here. God will make the Babylonian king look favorably on us so we need not be afraid of his wrath.” Or did they say, “Let's head for Egypt” as Jeremiah suspected? Let's find out.

JEREMIAH 43:1-7 (NLT)

“When Jeremiah had finished giving this message from the Lord their God to all the people, Azariah son of Hoshaiah and Johanan son of Kareah and all the other proud men said to Jeremiah. “You lie! The Lord our God hasn’t forbidden us to go to Egypt! Baruch son of Neriah has convinced you to say this, because he wants us to stay here and be killed by the Babylonians or be carried off into exile.”(Baruch wrote Jeremiah’s prophecies on a scroll).

“So Johanan and the other guerilla leaders and all the people refused to obey the Lord’s command to stay in Judah. Johanan and the other leaders took with them all the people who had returned from the nearby countries to which they had fled. In the crowd were men, women, and children, the king’s daughters, and all those whom Nebuzaradan the captain of the guard, had left with Gedaliah. The prophet Jeremiah and Baruch were also included. The people refused to obey the voice of the Lord and went to Egypt, going as far as the city of Tahpanhes.”

Not content with their own disobedience, they forced Jeremiah and Baruch as well as all the people with them to go to Egypt where God said they would die from war, famine and disease. At the time Egypt may have seemed like a safe haven and a respite from war. But the Babylonian army soon made their way to Egypt and conquered it as well and they experienced all that God said they would. They died from war, famine, and disease in the land of Egypt. If they had listened to the word of the Lord and stayed as God had directed them to do they would have lived to see their grandchildren born and raised in the land of Judah. As for Jeremiah and Baruch, there is no record of when, how or where they died.

There seems to be two reasons why the guerilla leaders refused to obey the word of the Lord. (1) They did not believe what the Lord had said through Jeremiah was true. In their minds they believed Jeremiah had been influenced by another for personal gain and therefore had misrepresented God. (2) They challenged God’s word out of fear rather than stubbornness. They were genuinely afraid of what may befall them if they obeyed the word of the Lord and stayed in Judah. Even though God promised he would make Nebuchadnezzar kind to them their fear overrode their belief and their willingness to obey.

Whatever their reasons it appears from these Scriptures that God’s delay in answering was because He was testing them to see what was in their hearts, whether they would obey Him or not. They had selfish motives in asking because they had already determined what they would do. They just wanted to use Jeremiah’s authenticity and reputation to approve of their actions and cover over their selfish desires.

What we see in these people is what we often see in others and in ourselves. What we say we will do is not always what we are willing to do. We may sound sincere in our quest for God’s will but when faced with a choice we will choose what we deem best rather than what the Lord has revealed is best.

Here is a modern day example. I know someone who simply got tired of being married to a wife who was a paraplegic and decided it was God’s will that he divorce her. He did not wish to honor his marriage vows and continue to care for her as God desired him to do. He simply

wanted to be free of that responsibility so he prayed and “magically” God gave him permission to leave his wife and find another who was not so dependent upon him for her daily needs. This is what I mean about coming into the throne room of God seeking our own will rather than God’s will.

The God of compassion and long suffering who calls us to love one another unconditionally and to honor our marriage vows would not have given that man permission to leave his wife. He was simply using God to justify his actions. What God would have given, had he asked, is the ability to carry on and the strength to persevere even when his own needs were not being met. He would have given him the ability to see his very needy wife through the eyes of His Son and not through the eyes of his personal hardship.

This man said he had prayed and God told him to do divorce his wife when in reality God had said no such thing. He simply attached God’s name to his selfish desires in order to justify his actions in the eyes of others. He went in to the throne room of God to ask for His direction but he had already determined what he would or would not do. It did not matter what he might or might not hear God say. He was already fixed on the path he had set for himself and had no desire to change direction even when confronted with God’s explicit word. He went in with the word divorce planted in his mind and came out with his own voice ringing in his ears.

Like the leaders of Judah we sometimes want what we want when we want it. But in order to justify it we seek a righteous covering for our selfish desires. Whether that is through a prophet or through a private prayer we all seek to justify our actions, especially when they are contrary to God’s will. In Romans 13:14 Paul says, *“Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh in regards to its lusts.”* We are not to allow the lust of our flesh to gain a foothold in our lives, for when we do it will inevitably lead to disobedience and sin.

Now the lust of the flesh can take many forms: Greed, envy, gluttony, sexual immorality, selfishness, jealousy, outbursts of anger, and drunkenness are just some of the ways our flesh likes to manifest itself. We are all tempted to give in to these baser instincts from time to time. But temptation is not sin. If it were then Jesus would have sinned for He was tempted by the devil in the wilderness and yet the Scripture tell us that Jesus was without sin. So temptation is not sin but it can lead to sin. James tells us how temptation can become sin.

JAMES 1:14-15

“Each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. Then when lust has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and when sin is accomplished, it brings forth death.”

When we are tempted the devil uses the desires that reside within our body of flesh to arouse our interest. Though our interest is peaked we are not its slave. We still have the opportunity to choose to do right or wrong. We can either ignore those thoughts, refusing to do what we are interested in doing, or we can allow ourselves to be enticed by dwelling on that lust so that we soon desire to do what we have been enticed to do. When our enticing lust is fully conceived it brings forth sinful actions.

I don’t know anyone in this life except Jesus who has not made some provision for the

flesh in regards to its lust. Some may have trouble keeping anger at bay; some may struggle with addictions such as alcohol, drugs or sex; some may be fixated on money, possessions, awards or fame; others may constantly be fighting for control over people or things. Some may want to party all night while others may want to withdraw and avoid interaction with others at all costs. Your tendency to sin may be different than mine but we all have that tendency.

We all battle the lust of the flesh. Just because we have become Christians does not mean that we are free from lust. There is a particular sin which easily entangles each one of us no matter how hard we struggle against it (Hebrews 12:1). Yet we have a power residing inside of us to be free of lusts influence. The Holy Spirit dwells within each believer. He helps us to overcome the desires of the flesh. But let's not fool ourselves. We will never be completely free of lust and our ability to be tempted until we exchange this body of flesh for our new spiritual body. As long as we remain alive on this earth we will be subject to the temptations of this world. So we will continually and consistently be faced with the choice to either obey God's word or refuse to obey and do what the desires of our flesh entice us to do until the day we die or the day He calls us home.

Like the leaders who asked Jeremiah for God's will, we too must deal with our unbelief, fear, and stubborn resistance to God's word. But we must not follow their example. We must trust God to be faithful and believe that what He says will come to pass, humbly submitting ourselves to His will and refusing to doubt His promises, regardless of what our flesh desires to do. We must learn the lesson of those who did not listen to the warnings of Jeremiah. We must release our fear and trust God to fulfill His word. Only then can His promise of blessing come true.

Our concept of God and of ourselves sometimes gets out of whack. We forget how powerful and yet how merciful God is in spite of the weakness of our flesh and so we drink from a diminishing well of selfish desires rather than the well which God constantly refills with His peace and grace. As Jeremiah said early in his ministry to the people of Judah, *"My people have committed two evils: They have forsaken Me, the fountain of living waters, to hew for themselves cisterns, broken cisterns that can hold no water"* (Jeremiah 2:13).

In our weakness we expect to be energized by drinking from the empty well of fleshly desires, rather than seeking refreshment from a well of living water. We would do well to remember there is a battle waging within us for control of our will; for though we have been set free from sin we sometimes turn our freedom into an opportunity to do wrong things, paying heed to our fleshly desires instead of the Spirit of God. Paul put it this way in Galatians chapter 5.

GALATIANS 5:13, 16-17

"You were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another...walk by the Spirit and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh. For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition of one another, so that you may not do the things you please.

"Now the deeds of the flesh are evident...But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience,

kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control...Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit."

The battle that the leaders who came to Jeremiah faced was one of flesh against spirit, the same one all of us here face daily. Will we pay heed to our flesh or will we submit to the will of the Lord? It is a constant tug of war which we sometimes lose. But the good news is that even in our failures we can find forgiveness and grace to get up, stand tall, and walk once again in righteousness.

I am reminded of a parable that Jesus once said. It concerned two sons who were asked by their father to go and work in their vineyard. The first refused to do it but afterward he regretted his words and went out to work in the field. The second son was also asked to work in the vineyard and he immediately answered that he would do it. But it was just words. He had no intention of working in the vineyard and did not go out to in the field with his brother (Matthew 21:28-31).

I have often been like the first son who initially refuses to do God's will but then repents and does it. But I have also had times when I have been willing to obey but my fear and unbelief has prevented me from doing what God required of me.

How do we reconcile our desire to be obedient with our struggle against sin? How do we remain faithful? How do we pick ourselves up when we continually fall? I know what I do. Whether I have said I would do something then did not do it or whether I have said I would not do something and then did it, in both cases I have relied on God's forgiveness. I have relied on God's word even when I have disobeyed it. For I am reminded that even when I am faithless He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself (2 Timothy 2:13).

PSALM 103:8-14

"The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness. He will not always strive with us, nor will He keep His anger forever. He has not dealt with us according to our sins, nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. For as high as the east is from the west, so far has He removed our transgressions from us. Just as a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him. For He Himself knows our frame; He is mindful that we are but dust."

I also have hope for I know that God is working within me through His Holy Spirit to will and to do His good pleasure (Philippians 2:13). His Spirit is helping me in my struggle against the will of my flesh so that I may do what is pleasing to Him. He is also encouraging me not to give up. No matter how many times I make the wrong choice God is willing and eager to forgive if I truly repent. So I take comfort in these words from Isaiah.

ISAIAH 30:17

"The Lord longs to be gracious to you, and therefore He waits on high to have compassion on you. For the Lord is a God of justice; how blessed are those who long for Him."

Despite the many times we sin God longs to be gracious to us. He is waiting on high for us to repent so that He can release His compassion on us. We are blessed when we seek after Him, longing for His forgiveness.

Scripture says that a righteous person may fall seven times but they will rise again (Proverbs 24:16). Sin may hold us captive to do its will from time to time. We may occasionally stumble and fall into the snare of the devil but we will rise again because God is actively working within us to choose righteousness over sin, to choose life over death and to repent of our failures. John assures us that we have God's guarantee that we cannot consistently sin because His seed, His Holy Spirit, is actively working within us.

1 JOHN 3:8-9

“The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil. No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in Him and he cannot sin, because he is born of God.”

Though the job of the Holy Spirit is to convict us of unrighteousness when we sin He will never condemn us. The purpose of His conviction is not to remove us from fellowship with the Father but to lead us to repentance. Our repentance in turn will lead to forgiveness of sin, even when we purposely choose it. We must never forget that we have an advocate in heaven, Jesus Christ, pleading our case before the throne of God. The accuser will point to our sin and pronounce us guilty, but our Savior rebukes him, stands up for us, and proclaims our innocence. This is reason enough to hold fast to what we believe.

HEBREWS 4:14-16 (NLT)

“...since we have a great High Priest who has entered heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to what we believe. This High Priest of ours understands our weaknesses, for He faced all of the same testings we do, yet He did not sin. So let us come boldly to the throne of our gracious God. There we will receive His mercy, and we will find grace to help us when we need it most.”

It is true that we still battle against sin, but we are covered with the blood of the One who has won that battle, Jesus Christ. We may be weak but He is strong. We can rely on His strength to bring us through this life unstained by the world and ready for heaven; unstained because He has washed our sins away; ready for heaven because we have been forgiven through faith in the One who understands our weaknesses and has made provision for our entry into glory. So do not be discouraged when you fall into temptation or when your words of faithfulness do not ring true. Jesus knows your weakness and He will have compassion on you. He will forgive if you will repent. He will pick you up when you fall and will restore any ground that has been lost to the enemy. He is the restorer of souls. To Him belongs all the glory and praise for our salvation.

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