

“Thy Will Be Done... But How Do I Know?”

Date: July 31, 2016

Place: Masontown UMC

Texts: Romans 12:1-2; Mark 14:32-38

Theme: God’s will

Occasion: Sermon series

Our Gospel lesson finds Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, facing the most difficult decision of his life. If he stays, he knows he will be arrested, tortured and killed. If he runs away, he lives to preach and teach another day.

If he lives, he can heal the sick and feed the hungry. If he dies, he may well wonder if his life really mattered. Would they even remember him when he was gone? So, what should he do? He agonizes in the Garden, praying to the point of sweating blood, so intense was his prayer.

In the midst of his praying, he utters this phrase, which many believe is the highest form of prayer there is. Jesus prays, “Thy will, not mine be done.” In spite of what *he* may or may not have wanted, Jesus was most concerned with doing *God’s* will.

Those of us who are followers of Jesus have adopted his prayer to our own prayer life. We will frequently end our prayers by saying something like, “But not what *I* want; *Thy* will be done.”

When we say those words, is it merely grim resignation, giving in to fate? Or, are we simply hedging our bets on whether or not we get what we asked for? Or, are we earnestly seeking to do what God wants? When we pray to know God’s will, exactly what do we mean by those words, “God’s will?”

In our sermon series on prayer, this is our topic for today: “What is God’s will and how do I know it?”

Books have been written and seminary courses have been taught on this topic. And I have about 15 minutes to talk. When we seek to know God's will, we are acknowledging we are not God. We are not the Master of the Universe. We admit that there is One who has more knowledge than we do, One who has a better plan.

Psalm 143:10 says, "Teach me to do your will, for you are my God." God desires that we seek Him and His ways. God desires that we live according to certain values and principles. When Jesus was teaching the disciples to pray, in the Lord's pray, he prays, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven."

To pray for God's kingdom to come, is to accept God's rightful authority to rule our lives. We are not free to do anything we want. To pray for God's will to be done, is to submit oneself completely to God's rule, as one's guide to life on earth. We say to God, "Lord, you show me how to live my life."

It is an attitude of submission, seeking to know how to live. When we speak of God's will, I am not a Calvinist, I do not believe in predestination, and I do not believe that every day of our lives is pre-planned and we have to guess what God wants us to do next.

When a child runs out into the street and is hit by a car, I refuse to believe this is something God has prearranged and planned and this tragic death is somehow fulfilling some divine purpose.

Awful things happen in the world. We don't have to put the blame on God. It doesn't make it any easier to cope with tragedy to say that God must have had a hand in it. For me, it only makes it worse. That is not what Jesus means, "Thy will be done."

Rather it is a statement of trust. “God, help me to so order my life that I put my ultimate trust in you.” Meister Eckhart, a German theologian, and mystic of the 14th century, put it this way. “It is the will of God that we surrender our wills. The only perfect will is the one merged with God’s. When we live by the will of God, it brings joy.”

To pray to know God’s will is to say, “God, your way is better than my way.” It is to allow God to guide and rule our lives. So how do we know what God’s will is? I’ve already told you what I think it is not. It isn’t the pre-arranged events of daily life. Instead, I believe

God has already told us what His will is for our lives, right there in the Bible. The Bible is our set of instructions for knowing how God expects us to live our lives. To know the will of God is to follow the guidelines God has already established for life on earth.

Psalm 40:8 says, “I delight to do thy will, o My God, thy law is within my heart.” This is the first way we determine God’s desire for how we live our lives – read, learn, understand and apply what’s in the Bible.

There are some very clear things we are told we should do; let’s call them positive commands, things like: love, pray, forgive, help others, and treat others the way you wish to be treated. There are some very clear things that we are told we should not do, let’s call them negative commands: things like stealing, murder, lying, being disrespectful of your parents and elders, mistreating and oppressing the widow, the poor and the stranger in your midst. Thou shalt not...

Mark Twain once said, “It’s not the things in the Bible I don’t understand that give me the most trouble; it’s the things I do.”

Far too many of us know what the Bible says, but we just don't want to follow what we know is the right thing to do.

Christian author Evelyn Underhill once said, "It is useless to pray God's kingdom to come on earth, unless we are willing to do something about it." In other words, when we know what God expects, it is up to us to "trust and obey."

To know the will of God, as revealed in the Bible, is not merely an exercise of the mind. It is meant to transform our way of living. Romans 12:2 says, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is."

We renew our minds by constantly seeking to know God's will, God's plan, God's blueprint for our lives. Not the details of whether I should eat eggs or cereal for breakfast, but whether I should be kind and generous, or mean and stingy. And then, we *prove* the change by the way we live. Do we do what is right, and avoid what is wrong?

God's will is revealed to us in the Holy Scriptures; it is revealed to us in the life of Jesus, and it is revealed to us through the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit, who speaks to us daily. "This is who we should be. This is how we should act."

So far we have talked about God's will as a general plan of living. We have ruled out God micro-managing the minutiae of daily life. Next week I want to share with you how we make decisions that are in keeping with God's will. I hope you'll come back.

I'd like to close by having us pray the prayer by Thomas Merton once again. Because he so beautifully captures the spirit of seeking

to know God's will. He displays the heart that desires what God desires, and he's earnestly trying to live into God's will.

But he also acknowledges that even when he thinks he knows God's will, he might have it wrong. That's so important, because it keeps us humble, lest we become so arrogant as to believe that we are God himself, and know all of his thoughts. Let us pray.