

The Will and the Way
LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church
February 25, 2024 PM Sermon
Reverend Peter Jonker
Colossians 1:3-14

“For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with a knowledge of his will.” After greeting the Colossian church, after giving thanks for their faith, Paul tells them he’s praying for them. And what is the first thing Paul prays for? What’s the first thing he asks God to give them? A knowledge of his will.

As a pastor I find that prayer completely understandable. When you are a pastor, people come to you with many different issues and many different reasons, but most of the time they come to you because in one way or another they are looking for God’s will. I’m dating this guy and things are great, but not perfect, should I marry him? What is God’s will? My job stinks. I hate my work, and I’m thinking of going back to school, what should I do? What is God’s will? I love my friend, but he’s not a believer. He’s such a good and kind guy, but has no part of the church. How should I talk to him? What is God’s will?

Frankly, if you asked most ministers about what they most ask for themselves, it would be the same prayer. Lord show me your will. Lord, how do I talk to this person? Lord, what do you want me to say in this sermon? Lord, where do you want this church to go? Lord, show me your will.” We ask for this all day long. Paul’s prayer for the church hits at the heart of what we are all looking for every day of our lives.

Paul’s prayer for the church not only prays that we would have a knowledge of God’s will, I think it also gives us a clue about where to find that will, how to discern that will. After offering this general prayer for knowledge of God’s will, Paul unpacks that statement with a series of phrases which give us some hints about what God’s will might be and how it might be discerned. And then, once God’s will is discerned, he has something to say about how to live out that will. So... the will, and the way to live it. The will and the way. We will use Colossians 1 to look at both these things.

First, it seems to me that Paul is saying, finding God’s will means growing in what might be called applied knowledge. Learning God’s will is a matter of learning common, everyday wisdom. “We continually ask God to fill you with a knowledge of his will through the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, so that you might live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way bearing fruit in every good work and growing in the knowledge of God...” Paul is praying for knowledge and wisdom that bears fruit in every good work. In other words, Paul is praying for the kind of knowledge of God that applies to real life, that has traction in real life, that bears fruit in your day-to-day living. He’s praying for common sense wisdom.

And when Paul stresses applied knowledge and wisdom, he is doing so in deliberate contrast to another kind of knowledge of God that was popular in Colossae in those days. It seems pretty clear that there existed in Colossae an early form of what we call Gnosticism. Christians were being tempted by Gnostic beliefs. What is Gnosticism? Well it comes from the Greek word *gnosis* which means, knowledge, so you might think of it as *knowledgism*. The Gnostics were very big on the knowledge of God, only they believed that the knowledge of God was something mysterious and otherworldly. God had nothing to do with this physical world, so if you wanted to attain knowledge of him, you had to attain through special practices, rituals, mystic fasting, divination. To know God was to transcend this earth and its dirty grind and to lift your thoughts up to another dimension. The knowledge of God, the will of God, were airy fairy, esoteric, mystical kinds of things.

In his prayer, Paul has deliberately chosen language that will pull all this airy fairy Gnostic language back down to earth. The knowledge of God is wisdom and understanding that bears fruit in every good work. The knowledge of God makes a difference in everyday life. The kind of knowledge Paul is talking about wears work boots and a hardhat. There was nothing fancy about this knowledge. You didn’t have to go into a trance to find it. It was plain, straightforward available to everyone.

We don’t talk about Gnosticism in the church much anymore, but when it comes to finding God’s will, we still think of God’s will as something revealed in unusual ways. We are still sometimes tempted to think that finding God’s will must involve a process that is strange and supernatural. You’re deciding what college to attend and want to know God’s will. So you grab your Bible and you randomly open it and assume the first

verse you read will give you the answer. If you read the word 'predestination' it must be Calvin. If you read the word 'hope' it must be Hope. If you read the word 'blue' you're Michigan bound. If you read about being 'made to lie down in green pastures' Michigan State might be in your future. That's quasi gnostic behavior. God may stoop to your weakness and actually show you his will through that method, but read the Bible and read this passage, and it's clear it's not the preferred method of discernment.

Finding God's will is not first of all about finding weird coincidences or supernatural signs; finding God's will is a matter of growing in your relationship with Jesus, learning his character, learning his teachings, studying his word. It is a matter, now using the words of the text, of "growing in the knowledge of God." It's about learning his character. Sometimes when you're planning a funeral, you'll be talking about what songs or readings or words would be in the service, and one of the family members will speak up and say, 'Oh don't spend too much time with eulogies, she wouldn't want that.' And everyone in the family will nod their head vigorously. They all agree that they know the person's will in this matter. Why are they confident of the deceased's will? Because they know her well. They know her character. They know her priorities. So it is with God. The better you get to know God, the better you understand his priorities, the better you will be able to judge his will in the decision that faces you.

Here's a place then where it is appropriate to put in a plug for the reading and teaching of good theology. Paul is essentially praying that the Colossians will become more theologically literate, because when it comes to knowing God's will, nothing beats a little Bible study, a little theological education, a little knowledge of God and his word. Knowing God's will means wrestling with questions like these: Who is God, is he a solitary being, or is he communal? Is he a God who is close to us, or does he keep his distance? How does he look at people? Is he bored, indifferent, waiting to be impressed, or is he loving? What makes God glad? What makes him angry? What is God's grace, can you define it? Can you give an example of it? What is forgiveness and how is it different than reconciliation? What did Jesus do on the cross? How does Jesus win his victories? What sort of people impressed Jesus the most when he was on earth? What sort of people bugged him?

These are basic theological questions. Answering all of them definitively is hard, but I hope that all of us could give at least some kind of an answer to them. Because if you can't, you are not in a very good position to discern God's will for your life. If you study the Bible and get to know the character of the God revealed there, if you prayerfully enter into a relationship with that God, you will be in a position to know his will. The Bible will not give you direct answers to all your personal decisions, but when you learn God's character, when you approach your decisions with prayer, when you do it with the advice of fellow Christians, you can be confident that the Spirit will lead you down His paths. I am convinced that any decision made this way will allow a person to lead a life worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work.

Paul's prayer doesn't just suggest how to find God's will; it suggests a way to carry out that will - "may you be strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and giving joyful thanks to the Father." How do we carry out God's will? We do it with joyful endurance. I'll be honest with you; it was really verse 11 that drew me to this passage in the first place. When it comes to doing God's will, verse 11 has become important to me. In fact, I've got it written out on a card and pinned to the bulletin board in the office.

There are different ways of doing God's will. There are different modes of doing what's right. When I was a boy, my Mother made it clear that the right thing to do, the proper thing to do, was to eat your Lima beans. If my mother made some casserole with Lima beans in it, I was not to push them aside, I was to eat them. That was her will. She had the same will about Brussels sprouts and liver. I accepted my Mother's will in this matter, and I submitted to it, but my way of carrying it out was to take all the lima beans out of the casserole and isolate them on my plate. And then at the very beginning of the meal, to get the horror out of the way, I would chew huge mouthfuls of beans and chase them down with swallows of milk. I would put my head down and slog through my duty, all the while complaining about how gross they tasted and how miserable I felt.

This is one way to live out someone else's will. Treat it like a grim duty. Treat it like something to be endured. It is not the best way however and it is certainly not the sort of attitude Paul is asking for in this passage. Listen to Eugene Peterson's version of verse 11 from his paraphrase in *The Message*. This is actually the version I have pinned on my bulletin board. "We pray that you will have the strength to stick it out over the

long haul – not the grim strength of gritting your teeth, but the glory-strength God gives.” Paul talks about enduring, but doing it with Joy and Thanksgiving.

I think that we all get into a mode sometimes where we approach doing God’s will, we approach God’s work, with grim, teeth gritted strength. (With teeth gritted): “I’ve got to preach this Sunday.” “I’m going to volunteer to teach Church school.” “I’m going to become a tutor.” “I’m going to share the good news of the gospel with my neighbor. I’m going to share the joy of Jesus.”

While doing God’s will with your teeth gritted is better than not doing it at all, it’s not what God wants for his people, it’s not what Paul prays for in the church. Ultimately, doing God’s will is a source of joy and freedom for a person. Finding God’s will is finding the person God means you to be. Finding and doing God’s will for your life means finally doing the thing you were created to do. There will be times of slogging and endurance, you may have to grit your teeth once in a while, but on balance it’s about joy.

Here’s a story I’ve heard over and over again throughout my ministry. A person becomes an elder for the first time and she is frightened by the magnitude of the task. The thing that scares her the most is elder’s visits. Going to a family to give them Spiritual encouragement. She is scared witless by the prospect. But she knows it’s God’s will and so she makes a phone call, sets up a time and on the appointed evening she walks up to the front door of the house with gritted teeth. But by the time the visit is over things have completely changed. She has heard the stories of this family’s faith life, she has been allowed to share in some of this family’s joys and sorrows, and at the end she prayed with the people about things that really matter. She is filled with something like joy and gets to the elders meeting and she says: “I think I got more out of that visit than the person I visited.” Well, exactly! This is the joy of doing God’s will. This is the glory-strength that God gives.

As we struggle to discern and do God’s will, I pray that we might be filled with spiritual wisdom and understanding, and that we might grow in fruitful knowledge of our God. I pray that we might have the strength to do God’s will with joyful endurance. And when our strength fails, or when our judgment fails, I pray for all of us what Paul prays at the end of the passage: “that we may know that he has already enabled us to share in the inheritance of the saints of light, he has already rescued us from the power of darkness, he has already transferred us into the kingdom of his Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”

©Rev. Peter Jonker