

God's Will and (or?) Our Own

11th Weekend in Kingdomtide – July 30/31, 2005

Sermon Background Study

Acts 17:24-28 (NRSV)

²⁴The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, ²⁵nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. ²⁶From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, ²⁷so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. ²⁸For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we too are his offspring.’”

Luke 10:21-22 (NRSV)

²¹At that same hour Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. ²²All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.”

Mark 12:28-30 (NRSV)

²⁸One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” ²⁹Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; ³⁰you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’”

What is God's will for us? God is Creator and Lord, yet we are free to love or not to love. This week, we turn to questions about God's will and our own.

Questions for God from our congregation fell into two categories when it came to the will of God. First, many questions focused upon knowing God's will for our lives. The second category focused upon questions about our salvation, which tend to boil down to, “Does God choose us or do we choose God?” In today's study, we'll take a brief look at both sets of questions.

God's will for our lives

Some Christians' understanding of God's will is that God has a detailed plan for our lives and that when we talk about “living within God's will,” we mean that our life is conformed to God's plan for us. Thus, a lot of prayer and effort goes into attempting to discern God's plan. For example, a young man might have two job offers in front of him. Desiring to live according to God's plan for him, the young man may try to discern which of the two offers is in God's plan for himself. In his book, *Decision Making and the Will of God*, Gary Friesen calls this “finding the dot” – trying to discern the exact next step that God has planned for us. In this view, staying on the path toward God becomes a bit like jumping from one flagstone to the next, always hoping and praying that you are getting it right. It isn't very hard to see how this “find the dot” understanding of God's will could be pretty troubling. How would you ever really know whether you've landed on the right flagstone or not? But there is a better and more biblical way to think about God's will for our lives.

Friesen's book has been in print for nearly thirty years, for good reason. Friesen helps us to understand that living within God's will for us is not a matter of finding the dot or landing on the right flagstone. Rather, living within God's will means living within God's *moral will*. God desires first and foremost that

*“What is your will for my life?
How do I know I am following?”*

This is a question from one of the index cards. If you've read the background study, then you can probably anticipate my answer.

God's will for our lives, each of us, is that we love God and love neighbor, that we live according to God's teaching . . . to his ways, not the ways of the world. We are to stay on the path of the wise, not the foolish.

We turn to the Bible to begin understanding God's moral teachings. Together with other Christians, usually in smaller groups, we do our best to apply God's teachings to the myriad of real-world problems, issues, and decision that we all face. We pray, individually and in community, that God's Holy Spirit will guide us in this and that we will, every day and in every way, be receptive and open to new learning.

We understand that we grow with our head, heart, and hands as we strive to be ever more mature disciples of Jesus Christ.

we love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength and that we love our neighbor as ourselves – this is God’s will for our lives and it is against this standard of love that we are to test our decisions. Let’s go back to the young man who is deciding between two job offers. So long as both jobs are honest and reputable, so long as both are within God’s moral will, then I don’t think God cares which job the young man takes. Work at EDS or work at JCPenney – your choice. God cares about how we live out our faith at work, but that is another sermon series.

How do we discern God’s moral will for our lives? God’s moral will is expressed in the pages of Scripture, read as part of the believing community. This is not a matter of treating the Bible like some sort of magic answer book – it is not. We come to a better understanding of God’s moral will for us by drinking in the biblical perspectives of God, ourselves, and our world. Just as importantly, we do not do this alone; we are part of a community. Every Christian struggles when it comes to applying God’s moral will to our day-to-day lives. In the upcoming *Passionate Life* series, we’ll talk much more about learning with others. But suffice it to say here that we all need a group of other Christians with whom we can discuss what it means to live within God’s moral will and to whom we will be accountable.

Free to choose? ANDs and ORs

I don’t have much space left, so let’s cut to the chase. God chooses us AND we choose God. It is that simple. Both are taught repeatedly in the Bible. We are a chosen people AND we have chosen God. There is no “OR” here. Indeed, Christianity is a *both/and* faith. Here are a few more of our both/ands. Jesus is fully God AND fully human. God is three AND one. We are saved AND we are being saved. The kingdom of God has come already AND not yet. We get into trouble when we go too far in emphasizing one side of the “and” at the expense of the other. John Wesley understood the importance of the both/and better than many. Wesley was determined to lift up both sides of the “and,” avoiding the mistake of thinking that he could resolve the mystery.

Admittedly, all this takes a big dose of humility. We want to resolve the seeming paradox, especially those of us, like myself, who tend toward first meeting God with their minds. But most Christian heresies over the last two thousand years have arisen from the attempt to figure all this out, invariably falling down on one side of the “both/and” or the other. Roger Olson recently wrote an excellent

“Why do you only ‘call’ some and leave others to be born condemned to hell?”

This is an example of a question that assumes the AND is actually an OR, leaving room only for God’s inexplicable choice of some and not others.

Though some Christians may hold to this view, it does not consider the entire biblical perspective. Is there anyone who is denied the freedom to choose? Is there anyone beyond the possibility of God’s grace and salvation? Is there anyone by whom God does not desire to be loved? The answer to these questions is no. God desires our love and for love to be love, it must be freely given. We are not robots.

If you would like to read more about this, you might consider *Predestination and Free Will: Four Views of Divine Sovereignty and Human Freedom* by Basinger and Basinger. It is still in print and available at Amazon. In it, four biblically-committed theologians present their views on this topic, as well as respond to one another. All four are well-respected scholars. You’ll see that all four push on the AND. Each theologian is sometimes seen by the others as teetering on the edge.

history of Christian theology, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, organized around fifteen both/ands of the Christian faith.

So, yes, God chooses us. As in today’s passage from Luke, the people of God are those to whom God has chosen to reveal the Son. What a remarkable claim, that the Creator of the universe has chosen to reveal himself to me. Surely, this ought to make us humble, not arrogant. As Paul wrote, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing: it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:9).

Yet, of no less significance is my own choice to love God, to choose God. As in today’s passage from Mark, the people of God are called to love God and love neighbor. And for love to be love it *must* be freely given. By definition, love cannot be coerced. You can’t threaten someone into loving you, or terrify them, or even bribe them. They might act lovingly toward you, but love has to be freely given or it is not love. No one desires to be loved by a robot. C.S. Lewis rightly noted that God did not create tin soldiers who had to obey their creator or had to love their creator. God desires from us a love that is freely given; anything else is not love.

It is hard not to emphasize one side of the AND over the other. Perhaps we tend to at different times in our lives; for example, at times we may especially need the confidence of knowing that God has chosen us. But, in the end, our challenge is to maintain balance, to cling to the AND.

Daily Bible Readings

(more on God's will)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Psalm 119: 105-144 God's word and teachings light our path. God's moral will is the joy of our hearts (v.111).</p>	<p>Day 2 Proverbs 8: 1-21 The gifts of wisdom? The wise person lives within God's moral will.</p>
<p>Day 3 2 Corinthians 3 We are ministers of a new covenant, not of letter (the law of Moses) but of spirit. It is God's will that we be bold in our hope (v.12).</p>	<p>Day 4 Romans 8 Here, Paul is urging the Christians in Rome to see that they have been called by God for a purpose, a purpose that cannot fail. Paul is not proclaiming some blind fate for us all that makes love a sham.</p>
<p>Day 5 Romans 10:5-21 Salvation is for all! Our choices are real.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Mark your calendars!! *A Passionate Life*

A new six week sermon and teaching series beginning August 14

Do you have passion in your life? Are you passionate about your faith? Are you a passionate disciple of Jesus? We know that passion is key to a fulfilled, happy, and productive life. But passion seems to elude so many of us. Did you ever see another Christian and say to yourself, "I want some of that!" In this new series, we will explore how to regain the passion in our lives and learn some simple easy-to-remember tools to help us in this. You will want to be a part of this!!

August Book Recommendation

***A Passionate Life*, by Mike Breen and Walt Kallestad**

This is the book that underlies the upcoming sermon and teaching series. It is an easy read, but still filled with many helpful, easy-to-remember, and challenging teachings. We hope that you will pick up a copy in the bookstore and read it before or during the sermon series.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

I guess we shouldn't be surprised that the congregation's questions for God take us into wide-ranging and challenging topics. Today's topic is certainly no different. You might break your discussion into the two aspects of God's will that I discuss in the study or simply spend your time with the one that interests you the most.

1. How do you usually find yourself thinking about or talking about God's will for your life? Do you ever find yourself to be "looking for the dot," trying to hop from imaginary flagstone to flagstone on your Christian walk? Do you know others who do? What has been your experience with the dot? What do you think Friesen means by God's moral will? Is it synonymous with God's teachings? How can we strive to live within God's moral will and not turn the Bible into a magic answer book? The truth is that the Bible does not speak to us about many of the issues and problems that we face. How can the Bible be helpful to us in all things?
2. What is your reaction to the ANDs of the Christian faith? How can it truly be that God chooses us and we choose God? It is certainly not hard to find passages in Scripture that support both. As Christians, what do we do when we come to mysteries that seem to be no more than contradictions? You might also discuss how it is that love is the key to understanding the importance of our free choice. If you were a pastor, what would you say to the person who wrote the question in the page two textbox?