

**The Lord's Prayer: Thy Will Be Done**  
*Sermon preached by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt*  
*Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA*  
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*Psalm 143:7-10, Romans 12:1-2, 9-18, Matthew 26:36-44*

Today I continue my summer sermon series on the Lord's Prayer and what it teaches us about how to pray by looking at the petition, "Thy will be done." "Thy will be done," of course, follows the petition we looked at last week, "Thy kingdom come." An argument can be made that to pray thy kingdom come and to pray thy will be done are simply two ways of asking for the same thing - the priorities of God to be accomplished here on earth as they are in heaven. But, rightly or wrongly, I prefer to differentiate between the two petitions. To my mind, to pray thy kingdom come is a grand scale petition. It is to say, "Let your reign of love, peace, justice, and mercy be made real throughout the whole universe." But to pray "thy will be done" is a smaller scale petition. It is to say, "In our individual lives, in our families, in our community of faith - help us to do and be what you would have us do and be. Help us to be about the work of your kingdom."

As a way into unpacking the phrase "Thy will be done," I want us to reflect on three brief passages of scripture. The first is from the 143<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, which is a prayer for deliverance from enemies. I'm going to read just verses 5-10. Note how, under threat, the Psalmist looks back on what God has done in the past and asks for God's Spirit to lead him to do God's will. *Read Psalm 143 here.*

Our second passage is from the 12<sup>th</sup> Chapter of the Apostle Paul's letter to the Romans. Up to this point in his letter, Paul has outlined his theology of how God's grace is extended to all people. Now he moves to address how people who know they have been claimed by grace should act in the world. Listen for what he says about transformation. After verse two, I'll continue with verse 9 through 18, where Paul gives clues about what that transformation looks like and how God's will is made manifest in transformed people. *Read Romans here.*

Our final passage, from Matthew 26, gives us Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane, right before Judas shows up to betray him to the authorities. Note how Jesus prays for God's will to be done, even when it might not be easy or pleasant for him. Listen for God's word to you and me in Matthew's gospel. *Read Matthew here.*

It may be that "Thy will be done," is the most important prayer any of us ever make. It is certainly instructive that it comes so early in the prayer Jesus taught his disciples to pray. After addressing God as our Father in heaven, and asking that God's name would be treated as holy, Jesus asks for God's kingdom to come (a grand scale petition) and God's will to be done (a smaller scale one).

We don't have a lot of control over God's kingdom coming - we can only do our part to live as citizens of that reign. We can do "kingdom work" and sing "kingdom songs", we can pray for it to be fully realized, but by ourselves we can't make the kingdom happen. Doing God's will in our individual lives is something over which each of us has more control. When we pray for God's will to be done, we can do something about it.

But the question that raises, of course, is what **is** God's will for each of our individual lives, for our families, and for our church?

I imagine most of us tend to ask that question primarily when we are facing major decisions in life. When the thicker acceptance letters begin to arrive from the schools to which he or she applied, the high school senior ponders, “Do I go here, or do I go there for college? What is God’s will?” When the headhunter contacts you, and you feel torn, because you like where you are working and living, but you can’t quite shake the sense that this might be the time to make a change, you wrestle with the question “Should I accept this job offer? What is God’s will?” When the doctor comes in and says it doesn’t look good, but there is always a chance, do you detach the respirator? Do you put in a feeding tube? What is God’s will?

Oh, it’s the big decisions in life that we tend most to think of in terms of God’s will. Should we take on this major mission project as a congregation or not? Should we, or should we not, get married? Do we make this move, or don’t we make this move, as a family? I don’t know about you, but these are the questions that usually cause me to think about God’s will.

The smaller things during the day, the question of whether or not to have a doughnut or a bowl of cereal for breakfast, a salad or a sandwich and fries for lunch, well, I don’t tend to think of those in light of God’s will (though perhaps if I did, I’d lose some weight!). Nor do I typically think of God’s will when I am trying to figure out where to park, or what tie to wear, or where I will go on vacation. There is value in thinking about even small things in light of God’s will, but if you and I went through our days constantly trying to figure out if each and every minor decision we were faced with making was in accord with the will of God, we’d be paralyzed.

The ironic thing about God’s will is that it can often seem very difficult to discern with regard to specific monumental decisions, and yet, it is fairly easy to figure out in terms of some of the smaller decisions we make day to day. For instance, I can say with some certainty that it was not God’s will for me to snap at my wife yesterday or to hold on to that resentment against my neighbor for years. In so many circumstances, I have a choice between doing what is kind, loving and generous and doing what is petty, mean or unhelpful. Praying for God’s will to be done in my life has everything in the world to do with how I respond in those situations.

So how do we discern what God’s will is in specific situations, both the big ones and the smaller ones?

The **first** thing to say is that we should pray for guidance in doing it. It is worth starting every day asking for God to show you what you should do that day. In doing so we join the psalmist in his petition, “*Teach me to do your will, for you are my God. Let your good spirit lead me on a level path.*” Thy will be done is not just for when we say the Lord’s Prayer on Sunday. It is for each day.

The **second** thing to say about discerning God’s will is that we should be open to it, particularly as it comes to us in little nudges from our conscience. You may feel it in the sense that you are supposed to do this, or not to do that. You may feel it in the nudge to go do something that wasn’t on your to do list.

One of my favorite examples of being open to God’s will was a time back at the church I served in North Carolina when I had a sense come to me one Friday morning that I should go that day to visit a couple who were members of the church. They were in their late sixties, and she had a number of serious health problems, but seemed to be doing fairly well.

I called them and went to see them later that afternoon. We talked for an hour and a half, and they said some things to me and to each other that really needed to get said. The next morning, a Saturday, I headed off for the weekend church retreat. Judith stayed home to preach and lead worship at our church Sunday morning. That Sunday morning, sitting in the pew right before church started, Ann had a heart

attack and died. I was so glad that I had listened to that nudge to go see her. To my mind, it was clearly God's will.

Now I also have many stories of not responding to the nudge when I felt it, but those are a much less satisfying to tell.

A **third** way to go about discerning God's will is to look to scripture.

Back in February of 2006, Bono, the lead singer of the rock group U2, spoke at the National Prayer Breakfast here in Washington. One of the things he addressed was the problem of poverty, and he mentioned that helping the poor and hungry is mentioned more than two thousand one hundred times in scripture.

Then Bono said this,

*"A number of years ago, I met a wise man who changed my life. In countless ways, large and small, I was always seeking the Lord's blessing. I was saying, you know, I have a new song, look after it... I have a family, please look after them... I have this crazy idea..."*

*And this wise man said: stop.*

*He said, stop asking God to bless what you're doing.*

*Get involved in what God is doing - because it's already blessed.*

*Well, God, as I said, is with the poor. That, I believe, is what God is doing.*

*And that is what He's calling us to do".<sup>1</sup>*

The ninth century prophet Amos used the image of a plumb line when he addressed the Northern Kingdom of Israel and their failures to respond to the poor and needy. The plumb line, a string with a weight at the bottom, was used to determine whether or not a wall was straight. And Amos said that God was holding up a plumb line to the nation of Israel and saying, "You are not measuring up. You are not caring for those most in need. You are not doing my will in the world."

Scripture can be that sort of plumb line. And not just the words of the Old Testament prophets. When we are trying to discern whether something is God's will or not, it can be helpful to think of it in terms of the Apostle Paul's list of the fruit of the Spirit. Is what I am thinking about doing going to lead to love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, humility and self-control, or not? That whole list is important.

At our church retreat back in April, we focused on the Fruit of the Spirit. For our opening gathering, Flynn Bucy handed out slips of paper with a particular Fruit of the Spirit to nine of us and asked us to talk about that fruit. When I looked at the fruit on my slip, I said to Flynn - "There must be some mistake. You gave me self-control!" I was joking, of course. But self-control is indeed a piece of God's will being made manifest in our lives through the Spirit's activity.

A **fourth** way to discern God's will is to look to the life of Jesus and what it teaches us about God's priorities. No one can emulate Jesus perfectly, but we can see in what we know of what he taught and did, something of God's way in the world. We follow a Lord who prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, "*Not my will but Thine be done*" and embodied love in the world to such an extent that he was willing to suffer and die - and he taught his disciples to follow him in being compassionate and

vulnerable. So when we are seeking God's will, one of the questions to ask is whether or not our decision is based in fear, an excessive need for self-protection, or an unwillingness to open ourselves to others.

A **fifth** way to discern God's will is to look to a community, a group of people who can help you get clarity on where God might be leading you. In the Quaker church, or Society of Friends, when people are seeking to figure out God's will for their lives in a specific instance (for example, whether or not to get married or whether or not to join the church), they will gather what is called a clearness committee.<sup>2</sup> This group of trusted friends listen to the person who is seeking discernment and reflects back to him or her what they are hearing and how they feel the person is being led. Sometimes the community can be like a plumb line.

The **sixth** thing to say is that when seeking to discern and do God's will, it can also be helpful to look back on the day in light of how well our actions lined up with God's best intentions for us. There is a spiritual discipline called *examen*, one which I have occasionally taken upon myself, which involves reflecting on the events of each day and asking questions like this:

In terms of my consciousness,

*Where did I sense God's presence most in this day?*

*Where did God's presence seem farthest from me in this day?*

*How was God loving me even when God's presence seemed far away?*

And in terms of my conscience,

*What are my idols, my unhealthy attachments, and my vices?*

*Where are my beliefs and actions not ordered towards God?*<sup>3</sup>

All of this returns me to the quote on the front of the bulletin today, from George Lawton. "Dante said, 'In God's will lies our peace,' but we better first make sure that it is God's will that we are obeying and not that of a frail human being, his whim or prejudice, or our own fear."<sup>4</sup> When we pray thy will be done, it is important to sort out what is our will from what is God's will. And it is important to move from praying that prayer to acting upon that prayer.

In Jesus' name.

*Amen.*

Aaron D. Fulp-Eickstaedt

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<sup>1</sup> For a full transcript of Bono's speech, see the USA Today website's reprint of his words at the following link: [http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2006-02-02-bono-transcript\\_x.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2006-02-02-bono-transcript_x.htm) USA Today

<sup>2</sup> For more on clearness committees, see the writings of Parker Palmer, or the following website:

<sup>3</sup> I was recently reminded of the value of *examen* by Rev. Beth Ford, friend. See the following website for more on the practice of *examen*.:

<http://www.metamorphia.com/Guidance/SpiritualDisciplines/tabid/83/ctl/Detail/mid/608/xmid/408/xmfid/20/Default.aspx>

<sup>4</sup> George Lawton, *Aging Successfully*, 1946,