

“Staying in the Center of God’s Will”

⁹ “This, then, is how you should pray: “Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
¹⁰ **your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.**

¹¹ Give us today our daily bread. ¹² And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.
¹³ And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.’ ¹⁴ For if you forgive other people
when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. ¹⁵ But if you do not forgive
others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins” (Matthew 6:9-15).¹

When Jesus gave us the Model Prayer, He told us to pray for God’s will to “*be done on earth as it is in heaven*” (Matthew 6:10), and our topic for this morning is how to stay “in the center of God’s will.” Before we get to that, though, I want to ask you three questions.

First, on a scale of 1-10, where 1 is “boring” and 10 is “passionate,” how would you rate your relationship with God these days? Second, in which direction are you moving, and how quickly? And third, what would you be willing to do in order to have a personal, passionate, and transforming relationship with God? Keep your answers in mind as we consider this matter of God’s will.

It is, of course, hardly possible to do justice to such a topic in just a few minutes. Many learned tomes have been penned on this subject, and I do not pretend to distill the sum of their wisdom this morning.² I do hope, however, to suggest some directions that may offer help, and I’ll offer more in this week’s *Laptop* on Tuesday.

Have you heard of Donald Miller? He is one of the most refreshing young authors on the Christian scene these days, and I particularly like his book *Searching for God Knows What*.³ Miller has some interesting thoughts about how God works in our lives. Here are a few of them:

“In my opinion, there are two essential problems with believing God is somebody He isn’t. The first problem is that it wrecks your life, and the second is that it makes God look like an idiot.”⁴ . . . “I didn’t have a relationship with God; I had a relationship with a system of simple [formulas], certain prejudices, and a feeling that I and people who thought as I thought were right.”⁵

“The formulas propose that if you do this and this and this, God will respond. When I was a kid I wanted a dolphin for the same reason. . . . It makes me wonder if what we really want is *control*, not a *relationship*.”⁶ . . . “If I want to hang out with my friend, Tuck, I don’t stomp my feet three times, turn around, and say his name over and over like a mantra, lighting candles and getting myself in a certain mood. I just call him.”⁷

“I began to wonder if becoming a Christian did not work more like falling in love than agreeing with a list of true principles. I had met a lot of people who agreed with all those principles, and they were jerks, and a lot of other people who believed in those principles, but who also claimed to love Jesus, who were not jerks. It seems like something else has to take place in the heart for somebody to become a believer, for somebody to understand the gospel of Jesus. It began to seem like more than just a cerebral exercise. **What if the gospel of Jesus was an invitation to know God?**”⁸

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland, on January 12, 2014.

² See Leslie Weatherhead, *The Will of God* (1944) and Morris Ashcraft, *The Will of God* (Broadman, 1980), among many others.

³ Donald Miller, *Searching for God Knows What* (Nashville: Nelson, 2004).

⁴ Miller, p. 21.

⁵ Miller, p. 31.

⁶ Miller, p. 12.

⁷ Miller, p. 13.

⁸ Miller, p. 46.

“*What we really need is somebody who loves us so much we don’t worry about death, about our hair thinning, about other drivers pulling in front of us on the road, about whether people are poor or rich, good-looking or ugly, about whether we feel lonely or about whether or not we are wearing clothes [as was the case in Eden]. We need this; we need this so we can see everybody as equals, we need this so our relationships can be sincere, we need this so we can stop kicking ourselves around, we need this so we can lose all self-awareness and find ourselves for the first time, not by realizing some dream, but by being told who we are by the only Being who has the authority to know, by that I mean the Creator.”⁹*

“Imagine how much a man’s life would be changed if he trusted that he was loved by God. He could interact with the poor and not show partiality; he could love his wife and not expect her to redeem him; he would be slow to anger because redemption was no longer at stake; he could be wise and giving with his money because money no longer represented ‘points’; he could give up on formulaic religion, knowing that checking stuff off a spiritual to-do list was a worthless pursuit; he would have confidence and the ability to laugh at himself; and he could love people without expecting anything in return. It would be quite beautiful, really.”¹⁰

“Personally, I was miserable before I understood these ideas, but now I am so happy I laugh all the time, even in my sleep.”¹¹ . . . “After all, if we are going through religious motions to get people to think of us as religious, praise us, and all that, we are receiving our false redemption from a bunch of people who are going to be dead in fifty years. This is a shabby replacement for [being in love with] an eternal God.”¹² Isn’t that good?

I’m sure you noticed that the central theme of Miller’s comments is that discovering God’s purposes and guidance in your life has a lot more to do with being in love with God than with anything else. And once we discover, as Donald Miller discovered, the joy of being in a love relationship with God through our Lord Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit, we begin to get a new grip on some things, including what we mean when we talk about “the will of God.”

Another author with whom I hope you’re acquainted is Henry Blackaby. In his best-selling book, *Experiencing God: Knowing and Doing the Will of God*,¹³ Henry wrote that “One of our church members was always having difficulty in his personal life, his family, at work, and in the church. One day I went to him and asked, **‘Can you describe your relationship with God by sincerely saying, “I love you with all of my heart?”**”

“The strangest look came over his face. He said, ‘Nobody has ever asked me that. No, I could not describe my relationship with God that way. I could say I obey Him, I serve Him, I worship Him, and I fear Him. *But I cannot say that I love Him.*’ I realized that everything in his life was out of order, because God’s basic purpose for his life was out of order.”¹⁴

Are you with me so far? The point I’ve been trying to make is that **when we consider how to know and do God’s will, it’s essential to realize that everything in your Christian life, everything about knowing God and experiencing God, everything about knowing God’s will, depends on the quality of your love relationship with Him.** If you fail to get this, you’ll never make very much progress in discerning the will of God.

⁹ Miller, p. 110.

¹⁰ Miller, pp. 176-177.

¹¹ Miller, pp. 14-15.

¹² Miller, p. 203.

¹³ Henry Blackaby, *Experiencing God: Knowing and Doing the Will of God*, revised and expanded (Nashville: B&H Publishing, 2008).

¹⁴ Blackaby, pp. 43-44.

My friend, if you do not have an intimate and personal relationship of love with God the Father through Jesus of Nazareth in the power of God's Holy Spirit, nothing else in your life is going to make much sense. But once you discover such a relationship and become convinced from your head to your toes *that God really does love you* with an unimaginably fierce and holy love, *then* you begin to be ready to know and do God's will.

You may have noticed that the Bible's focus is not so much on knowing the will of God as it is on doing the will of God . . . but even so, we wonder how we can do God's will if we don't know God's will. We yearn for the disclosure of some divine secret that will make everything in our lives fall into place—a voice, a sign, a bolt of lightning—something like that would be very nice, would it not?

I'm glad to be able to tell you that God's will is something that we can know, and it's something that we can know now. God's will is something you can know now because God's will is something you do know now. The Bible doesn't devote much ink to knowing God's will because the Bible's assumption is that God's will is *something we already know*.

We make the idea of God's will too hard, too abstract, and too mystical. Let me say it again: **God's will primarily has to do with a relationship.** God's will is found in the context of a passionate, personal relationship of trust and love with God, in a divine relationship of complete commitment and high adventure, *and nowhere else*.¹⁵

If I were to ask you to go to a chalkboard and begin writing all the things *you already know to be God's will* in this present moment, the results might be surprising. I could write, for example, that I know God wants me to see Him more clearly, love Him more dearly, and follow Him more nearly than I do at this moment,¹⁶ and I have some pretty specific ideas about what that might involve.

I already know that God wants me to develop a more disciplined study of Scripture and a more fervent practice of prayer. *I already know* that God wants me to be a better steward than I am of my physical body, and *I already know* with uncomfortable specificity what God's will is as it relates to my stewardship of time, talents, and treasure.

I already know that God wants me to be a more devoted husband to Jill, and I know some specific ways in which I might do that. *I already know* that God wants me to be a more exemplary parent and grandparent, and I know some specific ways in which that might be accomplished. *I already know* that God wants me to relate to all persons I meet with God's kind of love, and I already know some specific means by which I might put that into practice.

I could go on and on. Indeed, **I could probably fill several chalkboards with what I already know specifically to be God's will for me . . . and so could you.**

"But," you object, "that's not what I *mean* by wanting to know God's will!" Yeah, I know. You and I want to pick and choose the areas in which we seek God's guidance, which are, of course, the areas most important to us; but in the areas of our lives that are most important *to God*, God has already shown us His will. For example, God's will means *character* long before it means *career*; and God's will means that it is far more important to *be* the right person to be in a marriage than it is to *find* the right person to be in a marriage.

¹⁵ Sometimes we may feel afraid to know God's will, but 1 John 4:18 reminds us that *we need have no fear of someone who loves us perfectly; his perfect love for us eliminates all dread of what he might do to us. If we are afraid, it is for fear of what he might do to us, and shows that we are not fully convinced that he really loves us.*

¹⁶ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_of_Chichester;
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Day_by_Day_\(Godspell_song\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Day_by_Day_(Godspell_song))

From start to finish, **the Bible places much more emphasis on the doing that leads to knowing than it does on the knowing that leads to doing.** It is foolish to complain about those things we do not know when we have so much yet to do in the areas about which we know a great deal. I'm afraid that what we really mean when we talk about God's will is often something like, "Dear God, please help me to know your will so that I may do it . . . maybe."

The truth of the matter is that knowing the will of God is often much like stepping into one of those old telephone booths that you had to go inside and close the door behind you before the light would come on. Commitment comes first; insight comes later. God can and does speak to persons who are trying to be sensitive to God's Voice; but God generally doesn't overpower persons who have left their "spiritual telephones" off the hook.

Many people, moderately concerned that God seems far off from them, have never disciplined themselves to be ready to hear God speak. But if we take the steps we already know to take, even if they sometimes appear to have little to do with our challenges as we understand them, and even though they sometimes seem to be steps out into the dark, God will do the rest.

In every other area of our lives, we recognize the need to train ourselves in order to gain understanding and ability. We know that we will never be able to play great music unless we prepare ourselves to do it. We know that we must study poetry in order to comprehend its subtlety. Who would ever dream of practicing medicine without studying anatomy, biology, chemistry, and physiology?

Just pick your discipline, whether it be architecture, astronomy, athletics, aviation, banking, dancing, engineering, farming, nursing, real estate, or teaching. Who among us would expect to become expert in any of these endeavors without investing the requisite 10,000 hours to achieve mastery?¹⁷ And yet we expect spiritual understanding and divine guidance to come to us with little or no effort on our part.

Now whether we're 10 years old or 20 or 30 or 40 or 50 or 60 or 70 or 80 and beyond, God has put a hunger in our hearts for something BIG enough and GRAND enough to give all of our lives to. And it is a known principle of life that we tend to achieve that on which we place greatest value—which is frequently rather different from what we say we value most. Further, if you're at or past life's halfway point, as many of us are, the odds are very great that whatever is going on in your life at this very moment has a strong connection to whatever it is in your life *that is the real center of your true passion.*

So what is it that you want to achieve more than anything else in life? What sort of edifice are you building with your life, and what are you using for a foundation? It doesn't take much of a foundation to build a chicken coop, but it takes a deep and solid foundation to build a structure that reaches up toward heaven.

Has your initial commitment to Jesus been diluted or abandoned because of its cost in social status, time, or wealth? Have you said to Jesus, "I'll follow you this far, but no farther?" **If you have an obedience problem, you have a love problem.**¹⁸ And if you want to know the will of God, returning to your First Love is the first step to take (Matthew 6:21, 24).

The best assurance of hearing the Voice of God and knowing the Will of God in the future is secured by living in the center of God's will *today*. And so I ask you whether there is any doubt in your mind about being in the center of God's will *right now*? Whatever your circumstance as you sit here this morning, God is able to help you take the pieces of your life and begin rearranging them into something with present purpose and eternal value. Are you willing to let God do that,

¹⁷ Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success* (Back Bay Books, 2008).

¹⁸ Blackaby, p. 61.

no matter where it leads? You won't be willing to do that unless you are fully engaged in a relationship of love and trust with God. Punching spiritual checklists out of grudging duty and fearful respect won't get the job done.

The Good News is that as our relationship with God grows into a passionate, personal relationship of trust and love, and as, in that context, we deeply desire to know and to do God's will, God will reveal to us what we need to do next at the time we need to know it. Seldom do we receive much guidance beyond the next step, and seldom do we receive that guidance until we actually need it, because this journey is a journey of faith (2 Corinthians 5:7; Hebrews 11:1); but we are not left adrift in the world without any sense of divine direction. We can know what we need to know at any particular point in time. We can have enough insight into the will of God to take the next necessary step.

Henry Blackaby cautioned in this respect that "If you do not have clear instructions from God in a matter, pray and wait. Learn patience. Depend on God's timing. His timing is always right and best. Don't get in a hurry. He may be withholding directions to cause you to seek Him more intently. **Don't try to skip over the relationship to get on with doing. God is more interested in a love relationship with you than He is in what you can do for Him.**"¹⁹

And so, after all this, let's return to the three questions with which we began:

1. On a scale of 1-10, where 1 is "boring" and 10 is "passionate," how would you rate your relationship with God these days?
2. In which direction are you moving, and how quickly?
3. What would you be willing to do in order to have a personal, passionate, and transforming relationship with God?

I suspect that the favorite Bible verses for many of us are Proverbs 3:5-6: *Trust in the LORD with all your heart and do not rely on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths smooth* (JPS). Once we have a passionate personal relationship of love with God, *then* we become able to trust God with all our hearts.²⁰ And once we trust God with all of our hearts, *then* we become willing to say, "My heart, my life, my all I bring to Christ who loves me so; He is my Master, Lord, and King, **wherever He leads, I'll go.**"²¹

Let the adventure begin!

¹⁹ Blackaby, p. 75.

²⁰ In those times when the fog just will not clear, and decisions have to be made anyway, I've found considerable strength in a prayer by Thomas Merton: "My Lord God, I have no idea where I am going. I do not see the road ahead of me. I cannot know for certain where it will end. Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that I think that I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so. But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you. And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing. I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire. And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road though I may know nothing about it. Therefore will I trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death. I will not fear, for you are ever with me, and you will never leave me to face my perils alone" (from *Thoughts in Solitude* [New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Cudahy, 1976], p. 83).

²¹ B. B. McKinney, "Wherever He Leads I'll Go" (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1936).