

Taking Captive Every Thought

Number 4. On knowing God's will

Taking Captive Every Thought is a series of papers published by Three Rivers Grace Community Church to encourage believers to pursue the goal stated in the Scriptures (II Cor. 10:5) and reiterated by the leaders of the Reformation: to acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord in all areas of life. The papers therefore deal with a variety of aspects of life and how to bring them into submission to Christ.

Do you feel you have trouble hearing God? Do you wonder what His will is for your life, and wish you could be sure? Surely all of us have felt this way more than once. Let us consider the question.

There is a teaching about God's will that is frequently offered today in Christian contexts. Perhaps you have heard it; the wording is usually something like this: "God's will is what you would choose if you had all the facts." The intention behind the claim is apparently to help those who are anxious about what God's will might be, by reassuring them that it is always what they themselves would want in the end, because He sees the big picture, and is better able to know how they would want things to turn out. We might apply it to the Christian teenager's proverbial dilemma: "I don't want to surrender my life to God, because then He will send me as a missionary to someplace like Africa." The claim would presumably reply, "Ah, but even if He did, you would still choose it if you knew the great blessings you would receive as a result."

It is certainly true that God knows the future, and His will is always best. But is the above claim (about His will) true? To say that we would choose God's will if we had all the facts is to say that what causes us to fall short in following God is a lack of information. Is this our main problem? Many who hear the gospel reject it. Is this because of a lack of information? Or is it because they do not want to accept it? In Jesus' story of the rich man and Lazarus, Abraham said of the rich man's brothers, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead" (Lk. 16:31). So much for lacking

information. Consider even us who are regenerate. We still often fail to follow His will (I offer myself as a prime example). Is this because we lack knowledge of the facts? Or is it because of the sinful desires in our hearts? Paul wrote, "I find then the principle that evil is present in me" (Rom. 7:21).

Perhaps it is closer to the truth to say that God's will is what a *thoroughly righteous person* would choose if he had all the facts. Are we such persons? If we are honest with ourselves (or if we believe Rom. 7:21), we will admit that we are not. But we often fail to do this very thing. Too often we in the church are comfortable with the way we are. We think we are doing pretty well—a sin or two here and there, of course, but nothing "major." Jeremiah tells us that "the heart is deceitful above all else" (17:9). Funny, but it seems one way the heart is deceitful is that it deceives us into thinking it is not deceitful. Unfortunately, in many churches this problem is exacerbated by an inadequate doctrine of sin, and of human nature. One frequently encounters the idea that our sinfulness consists of certain external acts we commit (a sin at, say, 9:17, another at 1:42, etc.), rather than something that goes to the root of who we are (Ps. 51:5). For example, a Christian who works with Muslims was recently quoted in a mission board publication, saying, "They aren't going to hell because they are evil people. They are going to hell because they are sinners. They've missed the fact that they need Jesus." The distinction drawn between sinners and evil people is striking in light of Matt. 12:33-35. But the speaker apparently has fallen into an error that is all too common today, namely, that people are not radically evil, but rather are

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generally decent folks who nevertheless fall short, i.e., make "mistakes." This contrasts sharply with the biblical teaching that man's problem is that he needs to have his heart replaced (Ezek. 36:26). And this error leads to the very thinking that underlies the claim we are considering: note that in this quotation, just as in the original claim, man's problem is merely a lack of information ("They've missed the fact..."). In truth, the failure to acknowledge the depth of man's depravity leads not only to wrong thinking about the human condition; it decreases the magnitude of God's glorious redemptive work on man's behalf, and it also raises the question of why God would be so harsh as to condemn people to eternal punishment for such minor offenses (after all, they're not "evil people," but merely "sinners" who have just "missed the fact that they need Jesus.")

So we see that the claim rests on a faulty foundation, but the question still remains: how can we hear God and know His will? But perhaps another question should be dealt with first: why do we want to know?

This question is not as ridiculous as it may seem. Remember what Jer. 17:9 says about the deceitfulness of our hearts. When we are in turmoil about a certain decision we must make, and wish we could more easily discern God's guiding voice, why is it, exactly, that we want so much to hear Him clearly? Are we purely concerned for His glory, or are we just tired of wrestling with a dilemma? Do we always have an unalloyed desire for self-denying submission to God? Or is it frequently mixed with a sizable dollop of wanting peace of mind, or greater self-confidence, or to avoid the future consequences of a bad decision? In other words, do we really desire mostly to do something for Him, or to have Him do something for us?

Is it not a measure of the deceitfulness that remains in our hearts, of the sin which so easily entangles us (Heb. 12:1), that it is so easy for us to seek good and godly things, but do it for our own self-serving reasons? For example, knowing God's will, and seeking Christian fellowship, and attending church are certainly good things. But how often do we choose a church based on what we get out of it? How often do we prefer the fellowship of believers simply because, truth be told, we are more comfortable around them than around unbelievers? And when we cry out for God's clear guidance in our decisions, how often is it simply because, frankly, we are just

tired of walking by faith, and we feel like walking by sight (II Cor. 5:7)?

In everything, we should present our requests to God, as we are commanded to do (Php. 4:6). What is more, I expect most of us would say we have sensed clear communication from God at certain times in our lives, and surely we are thankful for those times. To clearly sense God's guidance and counsel is a wonderful thing. But I suggest that it is not a thing to seek as an end in itself, and, indeed, that doing so profanes God's counsel, and turns Him into our employee. The Scriptures teach us, instead, that we should expend our energy seeking to increase in godliness, and God will take care of all the various necessities of life (Matt. 6:33). The Psalmist reported that he had more insight than all his teachers, but he said the reason was that he meditated on the Scriptures all day long (119:97,99). Paul was given clear guidance by God about where to go as a missionary (Ac. 16:6-10), but, then again, Paul was a man who prayed always (Col. 1:3; II Thes. 1:11). Simeon was guided by the Holy Spirit to go into the temple on the very day Joseph and Mary brought the baby Jesus (Lk. 2:27), but, of course, Simeon was "righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel; and the Holy Spirit was upon him" (2:25). As we become more Christlike, we will realize that we are turning into people who hear more clearly from God. As the language of our hearts changes to become more and more like God's language, we should not be surprised to find that He is increasingly speaking our language. It will not be Him who has changed, but us.

On just about any subject affecting Christianity in America today, one hears plenty of talk, and not enough truth. This issue of knowing God's will is no exception. We are awash in books and methods and sundry advice. There may be some value in some of these. But to make it our primary aim to hear a clear word from God is a problem, not a solution. The real answer is to pursue godliness (I Tim. 6:11). For this much is certain: you must "not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind," because then—and only then—"you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom. 12:2).

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