

1 Epiphany 3 – Matthew 8

Jesus teaches us to pray for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven. He committed himself to his Father's will while facing the agony of the cross. What is the Father's will? St. Paul says that our Lord Jesus Christ gave himself for our sins to rescue us from the present evil age according to the will of our God and Father. That is God's will. He desires all to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. He desires mercy instead of sacrifice, compassion instead of condemnation, kindness instead of wrath. So much does he desire this, that he gave his Son up as the sacrifice, condemned under his righteous wrath against our sins. Jesus teaches us to pray for God's will to be done, and then he reveals the heart of God's will. He fulfills and accomplishes the desire of his Father by making atonement and purification for all sin.

Now, if we know that is God's will – if what God wants is accomplished and made known to us in this way – then we can pray for God's will without fear. This is very important, because God's will can seem scary to us. From our earthly perspective, it can seem random and unpredictable. What if God's will for you is that you suffer more in this life? What if he wants you to keep facing that same temptation, which seems to overpower you so often? What if he chastises our country with economic hardships or war? We know that God can do all these things. Jesus says that a sparrow doesn't fall to the ground apart from the Father's will (Matt 10). And the prophet Amos says, "Does any disaster happen in a city if the LORD doesn't do it" (Amos 3:6)?

God kills and makes alive. He gives and takes away according to his perfect will. It is therefore a fearful thing for us on earth to commend ourselves to his will. In fact, it's impossible for our own reason and strength to do this. When your flesh hears about God's will, it frets and worries over all the different possibilities. But when Jesus teaches us to pray, "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," he is not speaking to our flesh. No, he is invoking faith. He's speaking to the new man created in Christ Jesus, given by the Holy Spirit. He's speaking to the new heart, which God has given to us through the gospel. When your flesh hears of God's will, it can't live. It can only be crucified with all your sins and evil desires. But when your faith hears of God's will, it rests in the will revealed in Christ who says, "This is the will of him who sent me, that everyone who sees and believes in the Son shall have eternal life; and I will raise him up on the last day."

A leper came to Jesus and bowed down before him. He was unclean according to the Law of Moses. He couldn't enter into the assembly where the people worshiped the Lord. And yet, he shows us what true worship of God is. It is to commend yourself to his will. "Lord," he says, "if you want to (if you are willing) you can make me clean." The man's flesh was plagued with that terrible disease of leprosy. As far as he knew from the law, it was God's will for him to live apart from his family and loved ones. In fact, God spelled out with great detail in the book of Leviticus all the regulations for those who had leprosy. The law doesn't give any remedy. It provides no escape from this fleshly disease. It simply tells you to be examined by the priest if the disease ever goes away.

But the law also taught something very important. It taught that none of your own will power could purify your flesh. Not even the priest can do this for you. Only God, if he wills, can make you clean. Only God is the one who sanctifies us and purifies us. And

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this is the same God who has sent his Son into the flesh. The poor man therefore relies upon the will of this same Son of God. He trusts in the one who has come to do his Father's will. And he knows that in Christ God's will is always good. He says, "Lord, if you are willing, then you can make me clean." Jesus says, "I am willing."

Jesus then sent the healed man to do what God required in the law. Go back to the priest and have him examine you, just as God directed Moses in the book of Leviticus. Jesus did not come to destroy the law. He came to fulfill it. He came to do what the law couldn't do. The law couldn't make us clean, because our sinful flesh can only stand condemned before it. And yet, the law remains good. If you want to know what God wants from you, then listen to his law. Love him with your whole heart, love our neighbor as yourself. This is God's will for your life. Worship him as the only true God. Obey your parents. Defend your neighbor's body, property, and reputation. Love and honor your spouse. Stay away from the unclean works of unbelievers, like sexual immorality and drunkenness. Discipline your body and your flesh to do these things that you know God wants. But don't spend your time guessing and fretting about what God's will is for you. You might have to suffer at the hands of those God has given you to love. You might have to fight for your marriage or strive to be reconciled with your brother. Who knows what kind of afflictions God has in store for you.

All the while, what are you certain of? What can you know for sure is God's will for you? Listen to what Jesus says: "Have no fear, little flock. It is the Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32). As St. Paul says, "He has predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ according to the good pleasure of his will" (Eph 1:5). This is God's will, which faith always finds in Christ who came to do the will of his Father. No matter how many crosses you must bear, no matter how much uncertainty you feel in your dying flesh, you can be certain that God's will is always for your good. He desires your salvation, and he promises to work all things out to guard you in all your ways.

When Jesus came to Capernaum he met a captain, also known as a centurion, a Roman officer who commanded a hundred soldiers. This man knew something about authority. He was under authority, and he had many under his authority. He knew something about following his superior's will and about his subordinates following his will. But when his servant was sick, he went to the only one who was strong enough to help him. He went to Christ who came to do his Father's will. And he recognized that the will of God revealed in Christ was made known in his Word. Only Jesus had the words of life.

This Roman officer also gives us an example of worship. He comes in humility, unworthy to have the Son of God enter into his house. But he finds God's gracious will to save in the words of Christ. Just say the word, he says. If my servants go when I tell them to go, then much more will my servant stand up when you simply say the word. He didn't speculate about God's will when he said this. Instead, he confidently held on to God's Word.

Jesus marvels at the officer's faith, not because he can't understand it. He's God, after all. He's the author and finisher of faith. Instead, our Lord marvels in order to impress

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on us how truly amazing faith is. Faith clings to the words of Christ. Faith finds God's good and gracious will in the promise of his Son. Flesh and blood can't do this.

This is also why our Lord teaches us to pray that God's kingdom would come among us on earth even as it is in heaven. This happens when our heavenly Father gives us his Holy Spirit so that by his grace we would believe his holy Word and lead godly lives here in time and there in eternity.

The kingdoms of this world rely on a lot of guessing and speculating. This is because the human will is always changing and uncertain. You don't know how the market is going to go. You can hardly predict when a flood, hurricane, tornado, or fire will ravage through your towns. Try to guess which nation will attack another nation. Put up sanctions and form alliances. But you can only speculate about the troubles that are to come.

So it goes with earthly authority. You do your duty, but you can't know exactly how things will turn out, whether your children will get sick or injured, or whether those you depend on will become undependable. That Roman centurion knew something about these things, but he didn't rely on the guessing and speculations of his earthly job. Those who depend on such uncertain things can't recognize God's good and gracious will in Christ. They trust in their own righteousness, thinking they can prevent all their troubles by their strength and will. They rely on their own merits and resist God's gracious will in Christ. They will be condemned and cast out into outer darkness.

But those who rely on the kingdom of God and his righteousness always find rest for their souls, even when they are tested with fiery trials and afflictions. God gathers them from eastern and western nations alike, inviting them to dine with him in his kingdom. Because God's kingdom is not like the kingdoms of this world. The kingdom of heaven comes with the certainty of God's promise in Christ. As surely as Jesus has come into the flesh, fulfilled the law, died for our sins, rose from the dead, and reigns at God's right hand, we can have certainty in his Word that our salvation is secure. As surely as he did the will of his Father, we can be certain that God's will for us, his children, is always good. We have his will in his Word, the pledge of his Spirit in our baptism, and the will and testament of Christ's body and blood, given and shed for the forgiveness of our sins.

God has called us to do his will. He's called us to various levels of responsibility and authority. Through the various crosses he places on us, he teaches us all to repent where we have fallen short in our duties, even as he both humbles and blesses us with what he knows each of us needs. You can't know what all of these afflictions and joys will be exactly or when they will come. Instead, we commend it to God's will. In the meantime, his good and gracious will remains safe and sure for us in his gospel. So don't be afraid. God desires to give you his kingdom. Let us pray:

When life's brief course on earth is run/
And I this world am leaving,
Grant me to say: "Thy will be done."/
By faith to Thee still cleaving.
My heavenly Friend, I now commend/
My soul into Thy keeping,
O'er sin and hell, And death as well,
Through Thee the victory reaping. Amen.