

Lesson # 1 -- The Meaning of the Will of God

Introduction

- A. When we hear the term "the will of God" many ideas tend to surface in our mind. For some individuals the process will be characterized by questions (I wonder if I'm in God's will?) while others will be comforted (I'm glad I know His will). Most of us will have both responses.
- B. While the words "will of God" and cognates are used only about 45 times in the Bible -- the concept is always assumed and repeatedly taught.
- C. In this lesson we wish to clarify the concept of the will of God so we may more fully enter into that life which the Bible describes as "spiritual."

I. The Definition of the Will of God

- A. Our understanding of the will of God is intimately related to how God has revealed Himself as the Sovereign.

Remember the former things of old, for I am God, and there is none else, I am God, and there is none like me. Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel (will) shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure. Isaiah 46:9,10

In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will. Eph. 1:11

- B. While it is clear from the Scripture that God is the sovereign and thus in control of all things -- we also read of those who reject and live outside the will of God. In speaking to this issue it is common to define the will of God in a twofold manner.

There must be, therefore, a distinction between His secret and revealed, His decretive and preceptive will ... By God's decretive will, we mean that will by which He foreordains whatever comes to pass. By His preceptive, that by which He enjoins on creatures what is right and proper for them to do. (Robert Dabney, Lectures in Systematic Theology. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1972, p. 161)

- C. As we study the will of God together our concentration will be on His preceptive -- or moral will of God. The decretive or secret will of God is known only after the events come to pass. The only exception to this would be a knowledge of a future event through prophecy
- D. The moral will of God is clearly revealed in the Bible. We can discern how we are to live for God by a study of what we have been told in the Scripture.
- E. Many have added a third aspect to the definition of the will of God and called it "personal" or "individual." By this they mean an intimate plan -- particularly designed for each person. There is no question that God has promised to guide us in our life. However, in my view, this guidance comes only through a practice of the moral will of God.

II. The Explanation of the Will of God

- A. The basis of the will of God -- is the character of God.

The way God wants us to live, our manner of life, is patterned after His own holy character or attributes. The statement by Peter underlines this truth:

But as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation (daily life).
I Peter 1:15

- B. The expression of the will of God -- is the Christian life.

1. In both the Old and New Testaments the word "way" is used to designate how the believer is to live.

- a. The Old Testament word "derek" (way) is used many times in this manner.

For I know him (Abraham), that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the LORD, to do justice and judgment . . . Gen. 18:19

Ye shall walk in all the ways which the LORD your God hath commanded you, that ye may live, and that it may be well with you . . . Deut. 5:33

Teach me thy way, O LORD, I will walk in thy truth. Unite my heart to fear thy name. Ps. 86:11

(See also Ex. 33:13; Deut. 9:12,16; 10:12,13; Psalm 25:4,5; 119:27,30,32,33,37; Isaiah 55:7-9)

- b. The New Testament word "hodos" (way) is also used with the same content.

Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life . . . John 14:6

This man (Apollos) was instructed in the way of the Lord, and being fervent in the spirit, he spake and taught diligently the things of the Lord . . . Acts 18:25

But covet earnestly the best gifts, and yet shew I unto you a more excellent way. I Cor. 12:31

And many shall follow their pernicious ways, by reason of whom the way of truth shall be evil spoken of. II Peter 2:2

(See also Acts 2:28; 9:2; 18:26; Rom. 3:17; I Cor. 4:17; Heb. 3:10; 10:20; II Peter 2:15,21; Jude 11)

2. Through a study of the word "way" and its cognates we gain a clear understanding of the will of God for every believer. In summary we can say it is God's counsel -- made known through commandments, exhortations, examples, promises, and invitations.

C. The design of the will of God -- the believer's spirituality.

1. Our heavenly Father is seeking to rescue us from sin and its manifestations -- particularly in the area of our self-centeredness.
2. In His loving-kindness He has given us a pattern of life that will enable us to become a spiritual person.

D. The scope of the will of God -- all areas of life.

1. What we are to do -- the will of God.
2. How we are to do it -- faith, love, and hope.
3. Why we are to do it -- the glory of God.

III. The Instruction Regarding the Will of God.

A. Summary statements:

1. By the term "decretive will" we mean God's secret will by which He ordains all things. Some facets of His work in this area may be that He allows the results of sin to be carried out without intervention. It is important for us to remember that God is good and whatever He does is goodness. We must learn to submit to and accept His will.
2. By the term "preceptive will" we mean what God states in His Word as to how we are to live. This may be made known through commandments, exhortations, examples, promises, and invitations. This is the area where we must put the emphasis in our daily life.

To clarify the importance of His will for each of us our Heavenly Father has spoken of "the way" (manner of life) we will live as we learn to respond to Him as we should, by faith, love, and hope, in the practice of His will.

3. Too many of us are overly concerned about guidance in our daily life -- and have overlooked that which is much more important -- the will of God as a pattern of life. This is where we must begin. It is the very foundation for all the other areas of spirituality. Without a knowledge of and a practice of God's preceptive will -- we will not know the meaning of spirituality.

B. A suggestion: Let's follow the example of the Psalmist.

Teach me thy way, O LORD, I will walk in thy truth,
unite my heart to fear thy name. Psalm 86:11

1. "Teach me thy way, O LORD." A desire to know God's will.

The desire of David must be ours. We must want the will of God more than our own. This is the central issue because the manifestation of sin, in our daily activity, is always found in self-centeredness.

2. "I will walk in thy truth." A choice to practice truth.

The evidence of our desire to know God's will is found in the way we practice the truth we know. Many of us are agonizing about some area of life -- seeking God's will -- but we are not living according to the truth we already know. We may not live that way.

3. "Unite my heart." A plea for sincerity.

David here asks God to cure what is found in each of us -- insincerity, double-mindedness, vacillation, deceitfulness, hypocrisy, and pretense. How easy it is to give mental assent to the truth -- and then fail to carry it out. We all have a list of promises and perhaps even vows -- that we have not kept.

4. "Unite my heart to fear thy name. A prayer for reverence.

In this request David puts his finger on the secret. If he is to know God's will and practice it in truth and sincerity -- then he must know what it means to reverence God. Only a knowledge of the greatness of God and a translation of what that means into daily life -- will bring the necessary enablement into his life. And -- so it is with us.

Conclusion:

Now we come to the basic question: "Do we want the will of God enough to give up our self-centeredness?"

If we do then it would be well to turn Psalm 86:11 into prayer. Only God has the wisdom, love, holiness, and ability necessary to lead us into a knowledge and practice of His will. He will do this -- if we will follow.