



Thoughts from the Bible and Books Devotions from The Heidelberg Catechism

University Reformed Church

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122 Q. *What does the third request mean?*

A. *Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven* means, help us and all people to reject our own wills and to obey your will without any back talk. Your will alone is good. Help us one and all to carry out the work we are called to, as willingly and faithfully as the angels in heaven.

There are few phrases more confusing to the Christian than “the will of God.” The confusion is partly owing to the variety of uses in the Bible. On the one hand, God works all things according to the counsel of his will (Eph. 1:11). God’s will, in this sense, cannot be overturned, negated, or thwarted. What God wills will come to pass. But on the other hand, we must pray for God’s will to be done. The fact that we must pray for his will to be done on earth as it is in heaven implies that the will of God, in this sense, can be disobeyed and ignored. We can think of these two sides of God’s will as his will of decree and his will of desire. In the mystery of divine sovereignty and human responsibility, God superintends his creation down to the fine details of hairs and sparrows, and yet his commands can be disregarded by his rebellious creatures.

[Shameless plug: I have a new book coming out April 2009 that goes into more detail about these two sides of God’s will. In particular, I examine a third kind of will, God’s will of direction, and argue that finding God’s will for your life is all about holiness and obedience and little about whom to marry and where to work. The book is called *Just Do Something: A Liberating Approach to Finding God’s Will* and is being published by Moody. For a similar approach to God’s will, I also recommend Gerald Sittser’s book *The Will of God as a Way of Life*.]

The Lord’s Prayer is concerned with God’s will of desire. In heaven the angels always do God’s bidding and the saints ever live to sing his praises. There is perfect holiness, perfect obedience, and perfect wor-

ship. Jesus commands us, therefore, to pray that God’s will be done on earth just as it is in heaven.

According to the Catechism, this request from the Lord’s Prayer entails three things. **First, we reject our own wills.** The longer I’m a pastor the more I see that this is the real battle going on in the hearts of men, women, and children. Many times I’ve had people come to see me with a pressing burden or struggle, and on several of those occasions it quickly became clear to me this person or couple came to see their pastor in hopes that he would affirm them in doing what they were feeling was not right. It’s as if they had already decided what they wanted to do and had a sense that it would be frowned upon by the church, and even God’s word, but they nevertheless were looking for some sort of permission or acceptance of their rationale. The struggle, at the most basic heart level, was whether to follow their will or God’s. That’s the whole difficulty with being a Christian. God gets to make the rules, and we don’t like it.

The Christian life is about the daily dying to self—doing things God’s way even when it seems like the worst way. How often, I wonder, have I chosen my will over God’s? When have I rationalized and justified away a convicted conscience? When have I manipulated Scripture to make it say what made sense to me as opposed to the harder truth the text was actually saying? Notice, I didn’t say “if” but “when.” We have all stumbled in many ways, just as we all need to grow in the grace necessary to pray as Jesus did, “Not my will, but yours be done.”

This takes faith. We will not reject our own wills unless we believe that God's will is better. Thus, the Bible defines slavery as the freedom to follow our own sinful inclinations (e.g., "God gave them over" in Romans 1), while freedom is defined as slavery to the righteousness of God (see Romans 6). It takes faith to believe that slavery to God means freedom for us.

Which brings us to the **second point: we must trust God's will**. "Your will alone is good," Answer 122 tells us. To pray the Lord's Prayer takes a lot of believing guts. Our whole system of American government is designed so that no one alone can have their will be done all the time. The framers of the constitution figured no one can be trusted with that kind of power. No one except for God. Would you dare to tell your husband at the start of each day, "Honey, your will be done"? Even if he's a swell guy, no one deserves to have his will followed no matter what. No one except for God. When we pray "your will be done" we are confessing our confidence that God knows best, that his plans are good, that his way is always the right way.

If we are to be faithful and sincere in our prayers we will have to learn to steadfastly love the will of God as David did.

Your testimonies are wonderful; therefore my soul keeps them. ¹³⁰ The unfolding of your words gives light; it imparts understanding to the simple. ¹³¹ I open my mouth and pant, because I long for your commandments. ¹³² Turn to me and be gracious to me, as is your way with those who love your name. ¹³³ Keep steady my steps according to your promise, and let no iniquity get dominion over me. ¹³⁴ Redeem me from man's oppression, that I may keep your precepts. ¹³⁵ Make your face shine upon your servant, and teach me your statutes. ¹³⁶ My eyes shed streams of tears, because people do not keep your law (Psalm 119:129-36).

Don't let these words pass by too quickly. We are too prone to read spiritual words as constant

hyperbole. But pay attention to David's language. He longed for God's commands and pleaded with God to know them because they were wonderful and gave light. On the other hand, he balled his eyes out to see so much disobedience in the land. Who will weep for needless divorces, aborted babies, rebellious teens, selfish fathers, and spiteful mothers? Who will put away the pounding fist, the cowardly tolerance, and the cynic's laugh and instead shed streams of tears because sexual deviants, greedy executives, duplicitous politicians, phony Christians, and prideful pastors do not keep the law of God? The will of God alone is good and we distrust it to our shame and our hurt.

Third, we must carry out God's will. It does us no good, nor anyone else, if we love the will of God and long for it to be accomplished, but never carry it out ourselves. Here especially is where we must rely on prayer because the old self is neither willing nor able to carry out God's commands.

That's why we pray, "Open my eyes that I may behold wondrous things out of your law" (Ps. 119:18). And, "Turn my eyes from looking at worthless things" (v. 37). We need divine help so that God's will becomes our will. Then we can say "Your testimonies are my delight" (v. 24). And, "I love your commandments above, gold, above find gold...I hate every false way" (vs. 127-128).

God must make us willing. And God alone can make us able. "Keep me steady according to your promise, and let no iniquity get dominion over me" is the cry of every true Christian (v. 133). The will of God is not our duty or drudgery. It is our delight. And yet, it is a tortuous delight. It requires struggle against sin and the fight of faith. It means death, death, and more death. It means mortification, sanctification, and vivification. It might seem easier for God to simply annihilate our wills and infuse our souls with his. But that's not his way. He prefers slow, glorious growth. He doesn't want his will in us as much as he wants our will to be his. He wants us to want what he wants, love what he loves, and hate what he hates. He wants to see his power at work in us to will and to do according to this good pleasure. He wants what we want—to die to sin and live like angels.

Better keep praying.

~ written by Kevin DeYoung