

Riverside Reflections – Week 5 – God’s Will / Forgiveness

God’s Word is His will and His will is the believer’s way. Sometimes as Christians we are guilty of using the Bible as a tool in order to make God a tool to do our will, but God wants the Bible to make us a tool to do His will. God’s will isn’t about getting there faster and avoiding all disaster. Think about John the Baptist, the Apostle Paul, and our Lord Jesus, and think about what it means to be in God’s will because they were definitely doing it. Sometimes we want some specific directional things when we aren’t even facing in the right direction in the first place.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18 – This passage of scripture points us in the right direction. If we will do these three things that the text instructs us to do, and be concerned with developing them as holy habits in our lives, then we will be doing God’s will and be walking God’s way. Then as we move on, the path will become clearer, and we won’t have to be worried about asking for directions, we will be headed to the right place already.

Now Paul gives us instruction about God’s will also in 1 Thessalonians 4:3-6, and so do the other books of the NT, and so on and so forth. Yet this text is especially important to the subject because it is the framework of how we should be focused when seeking, doing, and living in God’s will. This passage grounds and guides us to be doing His will on our way.

We can speak of God’s will in three ways. First there is His ***will of decree***, the way things will be. It is something He ordains that will happen, such as what we see in Acts 2:23 (compatibility between sovereignty of God and responsibility of man) / 4:27-28 (Herod, Pilate, Jews, Roman soldiers: all different intentions, and each will be judged on the basis of their intentions but they all did what God had predestined to occur) / Isaiah 46:9-10 / Romans 8:28-30 / Ephesians 1:11.

Second, we speak of God’s ***will of desire***, those things He wants for our life but is up to us to pursue (cf. Matthew 7:21 / Hebrews 13:20-21). God’s will of decree is what will happen, but God’s stated will of desire can be resisted, ignored, disregarded. People who aren’t Christians are doing that all the time and Christians do it too. Learning and living to actually do God’s will, to trust Him and obey His commands is called sanctification, as we discussed last session.

The third way we speak of God’s will, and what we most often mean when we say that we want to know God’s will, is that we are looking for God’s ***will of direction***. We want some individual specific plan for some specific thing we aren’t sure about, and we might even call it the center of God’s will or His perfect will. The impulse that wants to do what is right is good of course, and we don’t want to go against the way God is guiding us. But too often we are waiting for some unmistakable impression, some crystal clear direction outside of biblical principles, a biblically informed conscience, and the freedom we have as believers. God does have a plan for each of our lives, and we can and should ask for wisdom, but most often we find ourselves after the fact tracing His hand of providence back through the events that lead up to where we are. Even when we cannot trace His hand we can still trust His heart.

God cares about our future, He does help us make decisions, He does direct our lives, and He does give us wisdom. He does want us to pray about it. There is no doubt God sometimes guides us in such a strong way that we have no doubt about the direction we should go, but we shouldn’t

always seek that, or wait for it, even with the biggest decisions we face. We can be frozen in fear, or superstition, and yet think we are being spiritual. God does not want us burdened about discovering some hidden pathway when He has already made the main path crystal clear. When we are looking for His will of direction it is found along the path of following His will of desire.

This text is one sentence; these three things are all bound together as the framework for doing God's will. In other words, when we are in the process of seeking, doing, and living in God's will, if we do these three things our ambition will be directed towards God. When we are living out the will of God wherever the path takes us, we will be on the right path.

Rejoice always – Philippians 4:4 (in the Lord, and our justification) / James 1:2-4 (in our fashioning, our sanctification) / 1 Peter 1:3-9 (in our future, our glorification)

Pray without ceasing – Luke 18:1 / 2 Corinthians 1:11 – a prayerful attitude, atmosphere, a willing sense of God's presence, everywhere is a sanctuary

Give thanks in all circumstances – Ephesians 5:20 – “always” means timing – “everything” means events – in all circumstances not for all circumstances – in everything God is there.

When we are in the process of seeking, doing, and living in God's will, we do it this way: we keep a joyful disposition, maintain a constant prayer life and cultivate a thankful attitude. When we will be developing these three holy habits, God will fashion us as a tool, as the instrument of His will. Be a tool in God's hands and He will make sure you do His will.

Don't Do It – Romans 14:22-23 – if you are in doubt about whether or not something is sin, you put the matter on hold until you can determine biblically whether or not it is or isn't sin. What if it isn't sin? At this point, that doesn't matter. Until you determine from the Bible (not from feelings) that it isn't sin, you shouldn't do it. Of course, if you determine it is sin, then that settles the matter. But if you're not sure, you shouldn't go ahead, because if you do, you are doing something that you think might be sin. To do what you think might be sin (even if it really isn't) *is* sin on your part because if you would be willing to do something that you thought might be sin – *that* is a sinful attitude. So even if the act isn't sin, your attitude in doing it *is* sin.

FORGIVENESS is something we receive, we believe, we give, we develop, and we remember. This is a broad, multi-faceted subject, and we could discuss many related things, such as

- forgiveness of sin is the foundation of our reconciliation (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:18-21)
- we are forgiven forever; past, present, and future (cf. Romans 4:7-8 / Hebrews 7:23-28)
- Judicial forgiveness is about God *being* our Father (cf. Ephesians 1:3-7 / Colossians 1:12-14), while Parental forgiveness is calling on God *as* Father, which is vital to our fellowship with God (cf. 1 John 1:8-9)

Our focus for this session is on forgiving others who have wounded us, in situations where they repent, and when they cannot or will not repent.

Luke 17:3 (4-6) – Rebuke and Repent

If (we are sinned against) – We have to establish it in the first place; have they truly sinned against us? Perhaps it is just miscommunication or not a sin at all. This doesn't usually start unless we bring the matter to them. If they bring it to us, the process is already started but we cannot hide behind their lack of coming to us with the offense, we must go to them and tell them of how we were sinned against. If we are indeed sinned against, and it is something we would continue to hold against them, then we must rebuke them, to give them a chance to repent.

Then (we rebuke) – rebuke means correct not condemn, bringing it to their attention, they may not even realize it, and if they do it is still right to bring it up. We rebuke with the sense that we are hoping that they will repent.

If (they repent) – The goal of the rebuke is to give an opportunity to repent and repentance gives us the opportunity to grant forgiveness. It is important to discuss repentance in this context.

When someone repents, what are they doing? What should we remember?

- Confession of the sin (confession means saying the same thing God says about it)
- Taking responsibility for the sin (I was wrong, not justifying the action)
- Asking forgiveness (not “I apologize”, or “I’m sorry”, but “I sinned against you, would you please forgive me”. If we ask for forgiveness and they say it is not a big deal, or don't worry about it, say to them it is a big deal, will you please forgive me, and continue till they say that they forgive you. It is biblical and very helpful to use these words.
- It does not mean we have to wait for some fruit (17:4, all they do is say it at this point)
- Our faith is not the issue, obedience to this command is (vs.5-6) – we are not permitted to judge another's repentance. If someone had sinned against me seven times in a day, in other words, they kept on and on, and kept asking me to forgive them, I might think that they were not really sincere. Yet Jesus still commands me to forgive them.

Then (forgive them) – When we forgive, what are we doing? What should we remember?

- Forgiveness is not a feeling (we can forgive even if we don't feel like it).
- Forgiveness is not necessarily forgetting. There may still be consequences, and restitution may need to be made. Time can be a factor. You can forgive someone but still not be able to trust the person; and that can be wisdom, not unforgiveness. An ongoing and thorough heart check by humble prayer before God is essential if we are to apply this properly without sliding into unforgiveness and calling it wisdom. What we want to do is have our relationships advance to the furthest point advisable. We forgive and build trust.
- What does God's forgiveness look like? Jeremiah 31:34 – When God forgives sin He promises never to hold our sin against us. “Remember no more” means God won't bring it up to our account again. God chastises me for my sin, yes, disciplines me, yes, punishes me, NO, because Jesus already took the punishment for my sins on the Cross.

- In light of the fact that God doesn't hold our sin against us, some might ask, "What about the judgment seat of Christ?" That will be about rewards, a place of commendation, not condemnation (cf. 1 Corinthians 4:5 / see our sermon *Crown Him with Many Crowns*)

So what we do when we forgive someone is that we never hold their sin against them. In practical terms this means we don't unnecessarily bring it up to them, to our own selves, or to others. It is a promise we can keep even if we don't feel like it. It is also something we cannot refuse if someone is repentant. We have to deal with this, we don't just "let it go" because we can end up holding onto it and become bitter and it colors everything we think about them. We have such a problem with bitterness because we don't have forgiveness, and we don't have forgiveness many times because we don't have a rebuke. This is a command of scripture, BOTH parts, not just the forgive part, but also the rebuke, but it must first be done privately.

Matthew 18:15-35 shows us this process. Vs.15-20 details how it may play out in the church (more on this in session 8), and then Jesus tells us what our attitude should be in vs.21-35.

- How often are we supposed to forgive? Always (vs.22)
- How much does God forgive us when we ask? Everything (vs.23-27) (in both instances they asked for forgiveness)
- Do we have any excuses not to forgive repentant people? No (vs.28-35)

Forgiven people become forgiving people. We have received mercy and we are called to be merciful. Ephesians 4:32 – we are to be forgiving to others because God has forgiven us.

We must forgive those who are repentant, but we must give an opportunity to repent, and not hold onto bitterness. We must confront them with the offense. Of course we need to realize the difference between a true offense and our personal problem with thin skin. We need to develop grace and mercy in our lives, and not be bothered over every little thing. Still there are times we should go to a person, and it takes courage to practice biblical forgiveness. Forgiving one another is part of our Mission Statement, but we need to be biblical in dealing with it.

Is it always required that I rebuke a brother who sins? No, if you are truly not concerned with it, if it will not become a root of bitterness (1 Peter 4:8 / 1 Corinthians 13:5). If love covers it, then it must be covered, but if you are still thinking about it, then your heart is uncovered.

What about someone who is over me in authority, like a pastor, a boss, a parent, an older person? 1 Timothy 5:1-2 – do not speak harshly, or sharply rebuke, but honor them as we correct them, like we would a father we loved.

We should consider our own spiritual condition before we rebuke someone. This is not in a "who is the better brother" way, but examining our own heart before the Lord (Matthew 7:3-5), as we will discuss with Mark 11:25. Your attitude may be causing you to see this out of proportion.

Two different facets of forgiveness – Luke 17:3 and Mark 11:25 are different.

Luke 17:3

- Horizontal focus – offended speaks to the offender (rebuking him)
- Conditional forgiveness (If he repents)
- Access to offender is required
- Offender is the one who benefits (you grant forgiveness)

Mark 11:25

- Vertical focus – offended speaks to God
- Unconditional forgiveness
- Access to offender not required (not a person who repents but anyone, access or not, no bitterness, we give it to God, Romans 12:17-21, you can only do this by praying first)
- Offended is the one who benefits (you are released from bitterness)

Unforgiveness breaks fellowship with God, and hinders our prayer life. We must be WILLING to forgive. This doesn't mean that we only have to forgive them before God but that we can hold onto our unforgiveness until we see them come to us to repent, and if they never do we never forgive. No, if we are able we must go to them, rebuke them, and give them a chance to repent. If we go to the person and they will not repent, and they leave, you release it to God (Mark 11:25) so that you will not become bitter. This is vertical.

What about those who cannot repent? You say, "I was wronged, but don't even really know who did it, I can't find them, and they haven't repented, this thing is haunting me, so what am I supposed to do?" This would include a dead relative. Other examples: you were robbed, spam ruined your computer, you were taken advantage of in some anonymous way, it was 20 years ago in a church I no longer attend, etc. Don't go looking for them, just forgive, don't demand your rights, you give them to Christ. If you don't have access to a person, well, you forgive them in the Mark 11:25 sense anyway, and the Luke 17:3 sense doesn't apply right now because there is no access, no active fellowship anyway, so it doesn't really matter, in that sense, unless and until they enter the picture. Then you forgive them, and begin to build fellowship again.

If your spouse, child, or family walks away with no repentance you can and must still forgive, in the Mark 11:25 sense, but now the Luke 17:3 comes into play in the horizontal scenario. We rebuked them and they refused to repent. We forgive them to God and release it, but we do not have to place our trust in them. If at some later point they decide to repent, we must then forgive them in the horizontal fashion, and offer fellowship once again. Think about the parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15) – the father had already forgiven the younger son, but until that son came back to seek forgiveness, he did not live in fellowship.

Matthew 6:14-15 – Think about this passage in light of our own forgiveness. The question is, once we have repented toward God and placed our faith in Christ, then, if we sin, do we have to wait until we confess before God forgives us? No of course not. If so, that would mean we fall out of forgiveness, we lose our salvation until we ask for forgiveness. Some teach this, but when we think it through clearly, that teaching is obviously in error.

The truth is that this passage is speaking of a similarity between our applications of Mark 11:25 and Luke 17:3, and God the Father's application of forgiveness to us. Let me explain. There is a difference between *judicial* forgiveness and *parental* (fellowship) forgiveness. Judicial forgiveness is about God *being* our Father (cf. Ephesians 1:3-7), while parental forgiveness is calling on God *as* Father. We are judicially forgiven the minute we commit that sin because we have Jesus as an advocate in heaven (1 John 2:1). What we need to do is to confess our sin before God in order to continue in and restore close fellowship (1 John 1:9).

We see, therefore, that Jesus was not giving some requirement for salvation. He was saying that those who are forgiven become forgiving people themselves (cf. Colossians 3:13). Holding onto known unforgiveness hinders our prayer life and our fellowship with God. Don't misunderstand; this text certainly isn't teaching that we must find all our past unforgiveness, even those we don't know about, which is supposedly blocking our prayers, and if we don't find that missing person and say the magic formula then we will never enjoy life. That is just being superstitious. No, a general Mark 11:25 / Psalm 19:12-14 prayer is enough for the unknown past. What this text is talking about is currently, knowingly holding someone in contempt, and perhaps for a long time. If we do not forgive we lose fellowship with our Heavenly Father, and we become resentful, of other people, of life, and of God. Resentment leads to cynicism, which leads to bitterness, which yields rotten fruit. Instead we should be agents of forgiveness (James 3:17-18).

In **Matthew 5:23-24**, Jesus told His disciples not to worship God until you have first reconciled with your brother. Of course this isn't always possible here in church if the person isn't here too. Also, some people will not agree to the process at all. Fortunately, Paul provides a supplementary note when he writes, "If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all" (Romans 12:18). In any event, let's not look for ways out of this, but ways to do this.

Do you forgive yourself? – You don't forgive yourself it is God who forgives you, and if you are looking for that, the power to forgive yourself, well then you are looking to be God and you realize you don't have the power and you feel bad and no wonder. Lack of ability to forgive self is not the problem. What is happening is that we are just recognizing that something more needs to be done. Although we recognize that we have been forgiven, we have not changed. We are crying out for the change that will assure us that we will never do anything like it again.

Instead of using this "I need to forgive myself" language, which is unbiblical, we need to learn to deal with the problems in our lives that led to the wrong, in such a way that we adopt a more biblical lifestyle. We accept God's judicial forgiveness and seek His parental forgiveness by confessing sin and seeking sanctification. We grow in the knowledge of our eternal forgiveness which leads to further growth in grace (Colossians 1:9-14). The most forgiving people ought to be the ones who know they have been forgiven the most. All of us must be forgiven of our sins against God, and against others, and through Christ, we can be forgiven, once and for all.