

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Scripture Memory		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	65		Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	Colossians 1:9-12; Hebrews 13:20, 21		
Date:	July 14, 2019 (a.m.)		

KNOWING GOD'S WILL (Part III)

The name Neville Chamberlain may not ring a bell with most people today, but to those of you who can remember WWII, he is a tragic figure. Chamberlain was the Prime Minister of Great Britain before Winston Churchill. When he returned to London after meeting with Adolf Hitler in Munich, he announced that his meeting with the Nazi leader had been a great success and uttered these now ill-fated words, "I believe it is peace for our time." It was only a matter of days (Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia) before Chamberlain realized he had been played the fool. In less than a year, England was in an all-out war with Germany. Chamberlain's folly, tragic as it was, does not outdo the folly people commit when they naively assume that they have peace with God when in fact no such peace exists (cf. Isa. 48:22; 57:21). This is indeed a fool's peace. Hitler conned Chamberlain, and our sinful hearts con us into thinking that our condition is okay, there's no need to be concerned about our sins. It's no big deal. This was not the case with the Psalmist. The Psalmist saw all too clearly the nature of his plight (Ps. 19:12; 119:9-16 and 141:3, 4; cf. also the penitential Psalms). "It is *indwelling sin*," wrote John Owen, "that both disableth men unto and hinders them from believing, and that alone. Blindness of mind, stubbornness of the will, sensuality of the affections, *all* concur to keep poor perishing souls at a distance from Christ. Men are made blind by sin, and cannot see his excellencies; obstinate, and will not lay hold of his righteousness; senseless, and take no notice of their own eternal concernments."¹ Last week we looked at how Reformed theology has understood the doctrine of God's will:

1. God's *sovereign* or decretive will = God's secret plan that determines everything that happens in the universe (Daniel 4:35; Proverbs 16:33; 21:1; Revelation 4:11; Ephesians 1:11; Romans 9:19; 11:33-36; Acts 2:23; 4:27-28). Because God's sovereign will is secret, it does not directly affect our decision making.
2. God's *moral* or perceptive will = God's revealed commands in the Bible that teach how men ought to believe and live (Romans 2:18; 1 Thessalonians 4:3; 5:18; 2 Corinthians 6:14; plus all other direct commands in Scripture). Where God has spoken in the Bible, the believer must obey. But God's moral will does not directly address many specific decisions faced by an individual.

In many Evangelical circles; however, an additional understanding of God's will is taught:

3. God's *individual* will = God's ideal, detailed life-plan uniquely designed for each person (Colossians 1:9; 4:12; Romans 12:2; Ephesians 5:17; 6:6; Proverbs 3:5-6; 16:9; Psalm 32:8; Genesis 24). God's guidance for decision making is given through the indwelling Holy Spirit who progressively reveals God's life-plan to the heart of the believer through a variety of means. *This is the aspect of God's will that is usually of greatest concern to those facing life's decisions.*

Two very popular books emphasize this: *Experiencing God: How to Live the Full Adventure of Knowing and Doing the Will of God*, by Henry Blackaby and Claude King; and *Finding The Will of God In a Crazy, Mixed-Up World*, by the late Tim LaHaye. When I was a student back in the mid 1970's at Christian Heritage College (now San Diego Christian College), LaHaye (who was the school's president) spoke frequently on this subject in Chapel. He held an unusual view on Romans 12:2, even from the traditional viewpoint. The final phrase of Romans 12:2 reads, "that you may prove what is that *good and acceptable and perfect will of God*," (NKJV). He says, "Most Bible teachers accept the three words . . . as modifiers of one will of God. By contrast, I view them as *three levels* of that one will." The terms "good" and "acceptable" describe "God's will for the people who fall into sin but then repent and still desire to do God's basic will" (p. 59). This corresponds to the idea of God's "second best" held by other proponents of the traditional view. LaHaye gives it great emphasis and even includes nine charts to show how specific individuals related to the three levels of God's will. By falling into sin you can forfeit God's "perfect" will forever, so you have to settle for only His "acceptable" will. If you stay in sin too long, then only God's "good" will is left for you. "Don't misunderstand," he pleads, "God's good will is a worthy option for the Christian who has rebelled against the Lord and has made many major decisions during that rebellious time" (p. 66). When most traditional proponents try to avoid or downplay this "second best" category of the individual will, LaHaye makes it a centerpiece of his presentation. One of his signposts to finding God's perfect will is inward peace. "Inner peace is God's supernatural sign that decides 'safe' or 'out' as we attempt to discern His will" (p. 107). "It's wise never to make major decisions unless the umpire, the Holy Spirit-inspired peace of God that surpasses all understanding, calls the decision 'safe!'" (p. 108). In practice he is more shrewd than his principle, for he realizes that often lack of peace is the result of immature anxiety, not supernatural guidance. The "melancholic" in particular needs encouragement to move forward because he rarely feels peace. "His lack of peace was more a function of his melancholy temperament than a sign from God not to marry" (p. 162).² As a popular rock band once sang, is "I have a peaceful, easy feeling" really an indication that we are doing the will of God?

I. **THE GOD OF PEACE.** Isa. 57:15-21 tells us that it is God who creates and establishes peace. To give vivid expression to this quality, the Lord is first described in His divine majesty. He is "the high and lofty One." As is His throne, so is He (6:11). He lives forever and is not subject to the twists and turns of earthly life. He is called "holy," a word in which both His superiority above the creature and His being separate from sin are expressed (cf. 6:3). This majestic God now makes a statement in which He sums up all the riches of the grace bestowed on the godly. Again, He first emphasizes His divine superiority; He lives "in a high and holy place," infinitely exalted above human beings (cf. 6:1; 18:4; 33:5) and unapproachable to sinners (cf. 6:3, 5). Then follows the gracious word that He also lives "with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit." As is evident from the word "revive" of which the next line speaks, both words refer to a life that is faint, nearly extinct, broken (cf. v. 16; 42:3), especially inwardly, for the revival is promised to the "heart" and to the "spirit." This state of mind is to be understood as a consequence of the anguish and distress into which the people have been thrust by God's afflicting hand, but even more as a description of their being broken in strength in a purely natural sense. For these people are the same persons as they who made the Lord their refuge (v. 13b); hence the implication of these words is that, in contrast to the "wicked" referred to in verse 20, they have allowed themselves to be humbled under the heavy hand of God. That the high God lives with such people (cf. Ps. 138:6) is to them a miracle of condescension. On the other hand, a high God and a lowly people go together well because only a lowly people acknowledge His highness. The result of this indwelling is that it revives the spirit and heart of the lowly and contrite; it serves to comfort and strengthen those who pine away in anxiety and self-accusation and restores to them the experience of joy.³

- II. **THE FLESH'S PEACE.** Discerning true peace (God's) from false peace is imperative. Here are some distinguishing characteristics of false peace.
- A. ***You Know It's Your Flesh Talking When the Peace Comes and You Don't Yet Abhor The Sin.*** You know that the only remedy for your sin is the mercy of God through the blood of Christ. So when you are wounded by sin and feel the alienation from God and his people, you look to Him for healing and quiet your heart: "Everything will be fine. Christ died for my sins. All is forgiven. Praise God!" But if with this your heart doesn't swell with hatred of the sin that wounded you, the words of peace are your own and not God's. Owen warns, "The flesh would fain be indulged unto upon the account of grace, and every word that is spoken of mercy, it stands ready to catch at and to pervert it, to its own corrupt aims and purposes. To apply mercy, then, to a sin not vigorously mortified is to fulfill the end of the flesh upon the Gospel."⁴ Our faith can look to Christ in different ways, depending on the occasion. By faith we sometimes see his holiness, sometimes his power, sometimes his love. When we come to Christ for healing and peace, we look to him as the One who was pierced, because "the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed" (Isa. 53:5). When we see our bleeding Savior, we mourn and grieve (Zech. 12:10) because it was our sin that pierced him. It is only his punishment that gives us peace, so when we look to him for peace, we must remember his pain. And we will detest our sin. Detesting sin is not the same as dreading the consequences of it. Again, hear the words of John Owen: "When a man fighteth against his sin only with *arguments from the issue* or the punishment due unto it, this is a sign that sin hath taken great possession of the will, and that in the heart there is a superfluity of naughtiness. Such a man as opposes nothing to the seduction of sin and lust in his heart but fear of shame among men or hell from God, is sufficiently resolved to do the sin if there were no punishment attending it; which, what it differs from living in the practice of sin, I know not. Those who are Christ's, and are acted in their obedience upon Gospel principles, have the death of Christ, the love of God, the detestable nature of sin, the preciousness of communion with God, a deep-grounded abhorrency of sin *as sin*, to oppose to any seduction of sin, to all the workings, strivings, fightings of lust in their hearts."⁵
- B. ***You Know It's Your Flesh When Peace Comes Only By Logic.*** It's possible, without the work of the Spirit, to use naked reasoning to apply Scriptures to soothe your conscience. In your tormented conscience you could turn to Isaiah 55:7, and you could conclude that God is speaking to you in this verse and has turned his anger away from you. And having done this, you could be dead wrong. The words of peace could be spoken from the flesh with none of God in them. "But wait a minute," you object. "This is the way the Spirit speaks, using his holy Word to refresh and heal us. How can I know when I'm just talking to myself?" Good question. For one thing, if you are God's child, He will not let you wander far in a delusion (Psalm 25:9). The peace you give yourself won't last long. Another way to tell the difference is that "reasoned peace" comes quickly, but God over and over in his Word tells us to wait on him (cf. Ps. 130:6). Self-healers are usually in a hurry and can't wait on the Lord. Another difference is that "reasoned peace" doesn't give sweetness and contentment to the soul. When God speaks, there is not only bare truth that satisfies the mind, but a power that settles the affections. But the worst difference is that "reasoned peace" doesn't change your life. When God declares peace, He turns his people away from their sin.
- C. ***You Know It's Your Flesh Talking When You Take Peace Lightly.*** How easy it is to treat sin and forgiveness as an everyday thing – and yet how dangerous. "They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. *Peace, peace*, they say, when there is no peace" (Jer. 6:14). "Just a glance of faith is all it takes," the flesh says. "Just a look over the shoulder at a few precious promises, and all is well." But the Word of God is

worthless to your conscience if you don't look intently into it with *faith* (Heb. 4:2). If you shop for peace with God the way you get dinner at McDonald's, you'll just as quickly find that it isn't true peace. Your sin will overwhelm you again before you know it.

D. ***You Know It's Your Flesh Talking When Peace Is Selective.*** If you humble yourself before God and seek his healing peace about your stealing from your employer by playing games on your computer all day at work, yet don't seek his peace about your hot temper with your children, any peace you find will be clouds in your coffee.

III. ***THE PEACE OF GOD.*** "My sheep know my voice" (John 10:4). Christ's faithful lambs know his voice because they are used to the sound of it. Because they commune with him often and hunger for the words that fall from his lips, they recognize the tone and rhythm of his precious words. They can tell at once whether he or a stranger is declaring peace. They know his voice because it speaks good to their souls. His word of peace humbles souls, cleanses from guilt, transforms lives, melts their hearts, and endears Christ to them. When you hear Christ speaking peace to your soul, you can rest in his comfort. But your flesh will grow sickly and pale, drained of its power by a renewed taste of God's mercy in Christ's blood. The God of peace equips His people to do His revealed will (Heb. 13:20, 21).

CONCLUSION: I close with these words of Owen: "When men do truly *look upon Christ whom they have pierced*, without which there is no healing or peace, they will *mourn*, Zech. 12:10; they will mourn for him, even upon this account, and detest the sin that pierced him. When we go to Christ for healing, faith eyes him peculiarly as one pierced. Faith takes several views of Christ, according to the occasions of address to him and communion with him that it hath. Sometimes it views his holiness, sometimes his power, sometimes his love, (sometimes) his favour with his Father. And when it goes for healing and peace, it looks especially on the blood of the covenant, on his sufferings; for *with his stripes we are healed, and the chastisement of our peace was upon him*, Isa. 53:5. When we look for healing, his stripes are to be eyed – not in the outward story of them, which is the course of popish devotionists, but in the love, kindness, mystery, and design of the cross; and when we look for peace, his chastisements must be in our eye. Now this, I say, if it be done according to the mind of God, and in the strength of that Spirit which is poured out on believers, it will beget a detestation of that sin or sins for which healing and peace is sought."⁶ This is also the key to knowing and doing the will of God. This is how we lay aside the sin that so easily clings to us and run the race with endurance, looking unto Jesus (Heb. 12:1-2).

ENDNOTES

¹ John Owen, "On Indwelling Sin in Believers" in his *Works VI* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1974), p. 308. As in the previous sermon in this series, the substance of this message has been distilled from this masterful work of John Owen, with due acknowledgement also to Kris Lundgaard for his analysis of Owen in *The Enemy Within: Straight Talk About the Power and Defeat of Sin* (P & R, 1998). Lundgaard is helpful, but there is no substitute for reading Owen directly.

² For an extended critique of these two books and others, cf. *Decision Making and The Will of God* by Garry Friesen (Multnomah, 1980 25th anniv. edition), pp. 427-468. This is the best and most comprehensive book on the subject.

³ cf. J. Ridderbos, *Bible Student's Commentary: Isaiah* (Zondervan, 1985), p. 520.

⁴ Owen, p. 46.

⁵ Ibid. p. 47.

⁶ Ibid. p. 72

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