The Third Petition: “War of Wills”

Psalm 103:20-21; Matthew 6:10 & Luke 22:42 (texts); Romans 7:14-25; HC LD 49

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Christian men, here's a line that's guaranteed to get that Christian girl of your dreams: “The Lord told me last night that you're God's will for me.” Well, almost. This is the line that one of my wife's suitors used on her when she was already committed to me. Obviously, it didn't work.

One of the most important questions that every Christian asks is, “What is God's will for me?” Very personal questions such as, “What career does he want me to have?” or “Who does God want me to marry?” or “Should I accept a job offer that would take me to a different place to live?” are certainly valid. We want guidance from the Lord as to our life's steps and to “try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord” (Eph 5:10). After all, he promises those who fear the Lord, “Him will he instruct in the way that he should choose” (Psa 25:12).

All Christians agree that we can answer these questions if we apply Biblical principles wisely in our life situations. But how do we know if this boy or girl we met in a Christian camp is God's will to be our lifelong spouse? The Bible doesn't say, “Ethel, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; she shall be called Mrs. Ariel Crisostomo.” Rather, the Bible warned Ariel, “Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers,” and saw in Ethel the quality of submission as well as “respectful and pure conduct.” He also discerned in her not only outward beauty, but “the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit” (1 Pet 3:1-4).

We are to let the Holy Spirit speak to us through Scripture, coupled with godly counsel from wise Christians, to help us make decisions pleasing to God. But often, it happens that in many of our important decisions, such as marriage, children, overseas job, our wills prevail over God's will. If the guy courting us is cute, has a good job, loving and caring, and makes you laugh, then why, he should be a great husband. So even if he's not a believer, our love for one another would overcome everything else.

The last two Sundays, we have studied the first two petitions in the Lord's Prayer: “hallowed be your name” and “your kingdom come.” The third petition, “your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt 6:10b), is a logical follow-up to the first two. When the heavenly Father's name is hallowed, and when his kingdom comes, his will shall be done, whether on earth or in heaven. This is what Martin Luther says in his Small Catechism: God's will is done “when God breaks and hinders every evil counsel and will which would not let us hallow the name of God nor let His kingdom come.” Perhaps this is also why Luke's version of the Lord's Prayer omits the third petition: when we pray the first two petitions, there is no need to pray the third petition.

So when we pray the third petition, “Your will be done,” we pray that the Spirit may enable us in two ways: First, to acknowledge and renounce our wicked will. Second, in so renouncing our sinful will, the Spirit will enable us to obey our heavenly Father's perfect will.
Praying to Renounce Our Wicked Will

The Catechism tells us that the first part of the third petition is a prayer to "grant that we and all men renounce our own will." Why do we pray that we renounce our own will? What's the matter with our will?

The whole matter with our own will is that it is enslaved by sin and Satan. Jesus told the Jews that their father is the devil, and they are slaves of him (John 8:34). The Jews did not realize that since Adam fell into sin, all human beings have become slaves of Satan. Since Paul learned from Christ himself, he says exactly the same thing in Romans 3:10-12, "as it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one" (Rom 3:10-12). And then in Romans 6:16, all who sin are slaves of sin, "If you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death ..."

Since all mankind are enslaved to sin, there is no such thing as "free will." Since we are all slaves of sin, how can we be free? Jesus told the Jews that since they were slaves of Satan, they obey Satan. And that is true for all of us. So Paul tells us, "The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Cor 2:14). He also says about all unbelievers, "They are darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart" (Eph 4:18). Why are their wills and understanding darkened? Because they have no Spirit to give them light as to their hopeless and helpless condition.

When God saved us, the Spirit gave us new hearts and new minds. He gave us wills that are now inclined to obey God's will. But our sinful nature is still with us, and we will not be perfected until the day when Christ returns to finally redeem us from sin, Satan and death.

So we read in Romans 7 how Paul struggles against his sinful nature, which he calls "flesh." Christians are simultaneously saints and sinners: saints because of faith in Christ, sinners because of the sinful nature that is still within us. This is a lifelong struggle, but it is part of our ongoing growth and maturity in Christ. And this is a sign of a true Christian, because unbelievers do not struggle with the knowledge that they sin against God. Maybe they struggle with the guilt of sin against their neighbors, but not before God. A Christian does not want to commit sin, but his sinful nature points him towards it, because the Spirit convicts him.

Not so with an unbeliever. Although he feels guilt about his sin, he continues in it because his conscience is seared. He has no Holy Spirit to convict him of his sin and to enable him to avoid and renounce sin. His will is enslaved to sin. So Paul cries out, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (7:24). His answer is direct and immediate: Jesus Christ our Lord, our Redeemer and Deliverer! (7:24-25).

Paul says that the will of the flesh and the will of the Spirit within him are in constant struggle: "For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate ... For I do not do the good I want, but
the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing” (Rom 7:15, 19). Without Christ and the Holy Spirit, who will deliver him from his wicked will?

So all of you single ladies: consider whom the Lord wills for you concerning your future husbands. The Bible says he must be a Christian. This is what the Bible tells you to do. Remember Abraham when he was looking for a wife for his son Isaac? He instructed his servant, “You will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell, but will go to my country and to my kindred, and take a wife for my son Isaac” (Gen 24:3-4). You are to go “shopping” for a husband in the best “malls”: in the church, in Bible studies, in Christian conferences, in the mission field. What stores will have much higher quality products: those at Glorietta Mall, or those in the tiangge? In other words, “shop” for your future husband or wife among your own people, where you will find quality men and women. Not in the tiangge, or in night clubs or bars. You single men, don't “shop” for a wife among the GROs in the videoke bars.

But our wills are still corrupted by our sinful nature. So when we find this gorgeous, nice, loving and caring unbeliever, we pray hard to find out if she's God's will for you. No, she's not God's will for you. We say, well, she might be an unbeliever, but maybe later, God would save her. And never mind that the man of your dreams is a drunkard and is jobless, and has no ambition. God will surely save him if I show him my life as a Christian, or if he goes to our church.

This is not saying that if he's a Christian, he's surely God's will for you, even though you don't really have any warm fuzzies for him. No, our emotions and feelings matter too. But combine your feelings with advice from friends and compatibility questions. All of these things matter, because finding God's will for your life in marriage is probably the most important decision you would ever make in your life in the Philippines. Because if you make a mistake, there is no way out—no divorce. Annulment is only for the rich. It takes less time than you think to realize that you've made a big mistake, and separation follows. What happens when you find another man or woman? There is nothing else you can do but to live together in sin, because there is no divorce. Think hard. Consider God's will. Consider your feelings. Consider counsel.

What about place of work? Before you accept a job offer, consider where you will worship God. If no true church exists in your local area, consider whether the material benefits of that place outweigh the spiritual value of honoring God and his people in the way he has ordained. You may feel financially enslaved to a location where the gospel is not truly preached. Take Paul's advice to heart. “Are you a slave? Don't let that worry you—but if you get a chance to be free, take it” (1 Cor. 7:21). This is especially important if you were considering working in the Middle East, in a city where there is no true church. There might be a church, but is it a church that preaches the true gospel, administers the sacraments according to Scripture, and properly exercises oversight over its flock? This is also important when we're considering a job that would prevent us from attending worship in the church every Lord's Day. How will my spiritual life be if there is no worship, no preaching, and no sacraments?
So there is a “war of wills” in a believer: his sinful will and God’s perfect will. But we are to cheerfully, without murmuring or gambling or backtalk, renounce our own wicked will and obey God’s perfect will.

**Praying to Love God’s Perfect Will**

Paul says that If we do not love and obey God’s will, we are foolish, “Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is” (Eph 5:17). But are we praying that the will, the commands, and the Word of God may be done in heaven, because there is a possibility of his will not being done in heaven?

No, heaven is a perfect, pure place, where all of God's will is done. The angels in heaven, according to Psalm 103:20-21, obey God's will perfectly, “Bless the LORD, O you his angels, you mighty ones who do his word, obeying the voice of his word! Bless the LORD, all his hosts, his ministers, who do his will!” This heavenly host is ready to give glory to God, as when the angels sang on the night that Jesus was born. They also willingly and cheerfully serve him, “a thousand thousands served him, and ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him” (Dan 7:10). They serve him as they are sent to care for God’s people, “Are they not all ministering spirits sent out to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation?” (Heb 11:4). God’s will is perfectly done in heaven, as the Catechism tells us, “as the angels do in heaven.”

But what about on earth—is God’s will done? And how do we know God's will? It is through Scripture. Our heavenly Father has revealed everything that he wants us to know in Scripture. In our worship service, we often read the Ten Commandments, which is his will for his people, whether in the Old Testament or New Testament. We often read the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7, where Jesus teaches us how to conduct our lives as citizens of his heavenly kingdom. We often read Paul’s warnings against the works of the sinful nature, contrasted with the fruits of a Spirit-filled life in Galatians 5. All of these things about our redemption and sanctification are readily available to us in the Bible. This is what is often called God’s “revealed will.”

Acts 21 is a good example of God’s revealed will. On his travel back from his third missionary journey, Paul was told by God to go back to Jerusalem. The Christians in Tyre and a prophet in Caesarea named Agabus warned him not to go because he will be imprisoned there by the Jews. But Paul would not be persuaded because God revealed to him that it was his will that he must go to Jerusalem, even though he knew martyrdom might be waiting for there. So his companions stopped trying to dissuade him saying, “Let the will of the Lord be done” (Acts 21:14).

This is why we often hear Reformed believers, “If the Lord wills,” or “Lord willing.” If you receive a message from a Christian friend, and he writes, “D.V., I will see you next Lord’s Day,” it means Deo volente, “if God wills” in Latin. We get this from James, where he says we are not say, “Today or tomorrow we will go into such and such a town and spend a year there and trade and make a profit” because we “do not know what tomorrow will bring.” Instead, we are to say, “If the Lord wills, we will live and do this or that” (Jas 4:13-15).
James answers a very common question in a believer's mind: If we do not know what
tomorrow will bring, how then are we going to know God's will? The answer is, we know God's
revealed will from Scripture, but those things that are not revealed is, as R. C. Sproul says, “none of
our business.” Knowing God's will does not mean that a Christian tries to discern God’s secret or
hidden will, but that he applies God’s general principles for life revealed in the Bible. We are to
“try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord” (Eph 5:10) according to these principles.

God chose to reveal to us only those things needful for our salvation and sanctification. But he
chose not to reveal to us all other things known to him. This is why Moses says,

The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to
us and to our children forever; that we may do all the words of this law (Deut 29:29).

Those things that God chose to reveal to his people are for their benefit. He makes them clear
and not difficult for them to understand. To be sure, all things in the Bible are not equally clear or
equally difficult. Some are easy to understand, but some are beyond our present comprehension. If
all things are equally clear, then there would be no controversies and arguments about Biblical
teachings such as infant baptism and prophecy. However, as the Westminster Confession affirms,
all things for our salvation are understandable even to the most common or “unlearned” people:

All things in Scripture are not alike plain in themselves, nor alike clear unto all: yet those
things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed for salvation, are so clearly
propounded, and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but
the unlearned, in a due use of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient
understanding of them (WCF 1:7).

Since God’s revealed will is all that is necessary for our salvation and sanctification, we are
commanded to be obedient to come to Christian maturity. In Romans 10:6-8, Paul quotes
Deuteronomy 30:11-14, where the LORD tells Israel that his Word is given for their understanding
and for their obedience, “For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for
you ... But the word is very near you. It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it"

God reveals some things, but there are secret things he chose not to reveal to his people. What
are these things that are hidden from us? Popular date-setters violate Jesus’ warning not to
speculate when he will return, “But concerning that day and hour no one knows” (Matt 24:36).
Many Christians consult horoscopes, even those who try to contact the dead, so they may know
the future. If we pry into the future, we end up violating God's will.

Does this mean that God has two wills? No, God has one perfect will. He has revealed some of
it, which we read in the Bible. All things concerning the redemption of God's people are there, from
Genesis to Revelation. But he has kept some of it from us, his secret will. Before the creation of the
world, he has elected some to be saved, some not to be saved. Is it our business to know who are
elect and who are not? No, we are commanded only to declare God's word and mighty works
before our family and friends, even strangers. And then we are to pray, “If it is your will, may your
Spirit give faith and repentance to this person.”
Friends, you are to deny and renounce our own sinful will, and then love and obey the perfect will of your heavenly Father. Pray that the Holy Spirit will enable you to do this.

When Jesus lived on this earth, he frequently told his disciples that it was his mission to obey his Father's will. And because the Spirit of the LORD was upon him, he was able to accomplish this mission. He lived a life of perfect love and obedience to his Father, just as he repeatedly said: “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work” (John 4:34); “I seek not my own will but the will of him who sent me” (John 5:30); “For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me” (John 6:38). This he accomplished because he loves his Father, “I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father” (John 14:31).

This is why the writer of Hebrews applies Psalm 40:8 to Christ's obedient life all the way to the cross, “I delight to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.” He took upon himself the cup of suffering and death for your sake, to save you from slavery to sin and Satan. It was Christ's perfect will that he obediently endured a shameful death on the accursed tree.

Jesus' experienced extreme spiritual and physical agony when he thought of bearing the full weight of God's wrath on the sins of his people. His pain was so great that his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground. But even so, he was able to pray the prayer that he taught his disciples, “Not my will, but yours be done.”

May this be our prayer too, today until that glorious day when our Lord redeems us from our own sinful will, and gives us perfect, obedient will. On that day, our Father's will shall be fully and perfectly done—not only in heaven, but in all the earth.