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Romans 12
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DISCERNING THE WILL OF GOD

"... be transformed, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect will of God."

Romans 12:2

T. H. White, author of The Once and Future King, which relates the legend of King Arthur, has Merlyn the Magician tell a story with a deep insight into the ineffable nature of God and his inscrutable ways with men.

A certain Rabbi went on a journey with the prophet Elijah. They walked all day and when night came they arrived at the humble cottage of a poor man, whose only treasure was a cow. The man and his wife ran out to welcome the strangers and offered them all the simple hospitality which they were able to give. Elijah and the Rabbi were entertained with plenty of cow's milk and sustained with home made bread and butter. They were put to sleep in the best bed, while their kindly hosts lay down before the kitchen fire. But in the morning the poor man's cow was dead. The Rabbi thought Elijah should have saved it.

The next day they again walked many miles. When evening came they arrived at the house of a very wealthy merchant whose hospitality they craved. The merchant, however, was cold and proud, and all that he would do for the prophet and his companion was to lodge them in a cowshed and feed them on bread and water. In the morning Elijah thanked him very much for what he had done and, as a return for his kindness, sent for a mason to repair one of his walls which happened to be falling down.

When they were once more on their way, the Rabbi, unable to keep silent any longer, begged the holy man to explain the meaning of his dealings with human beings. Replied the prophet, "In regard to the poor man who received us so hospitably, it was decreed that his wife was to die that night, but in reward for his goodness to us God took the cow instead of the wife. I repaired the wall of the rich miser because a chest of gold was concealed near the place, and if the miser had repaired the wall himself, he would have discovered the treasure. Say not therefore to the Lord, 'What doest thou?' But say in thy heart, 'Must not the Lord of all the earth do right?'"

The ways of the Lord are indeed inscrutable and it is difficult to know whether any particular event is coincidence or providence.

II

In the sense that nothing ever happens without a reason, there is no such thing as chance or accident. Everything in our world is the result of a cause, and every cause has an effect. This is not to say, however, that everything that happens is the will of God. Many people are tempted to ascribe all that happens to God because they feel that to do so is somehow or other comforting. They do not like the alternative which is that some things happen as the result of man's sin and ignorance, and therefore happen outside the providence of God.

On the other hand, there are also people who find difficulty believing that God has any will at all concerning the detailed activities of each person's life. Jesus insisted that the hairs of our heads were numbered. But, ask some, how could the

God of all the universe be concerned about such relatively insignificant matters as should I or should I not take this new job that has been offered to me, go to Europe next July, or enlist in the armed services before I get drafted?

In order to answer such difficult questions, we must first understand what is meant by the will of God. When Jesus insisted that not a sparrow falls to the ground without God's notice, he did not mean that God kept a running inventory on every species of bird. Rather, he was saying that God has an over-all purpose for the universe he has created, and therefore he has an interest in and concern for everything he has put into it. Perhaps it would be better to say that God has an ultimate will, or intention concerning his universe and everything in it. That intention and purpose is that man, and the environment of which he is a part, should grow and develop and mature toward some goal which, as of the present, man can only dimly perceive.

Let me put it this way. All of us love good cooking. Perhaps the most widespread sin in America is our overindulgence in gastronomical delights, which in the old days was called gluttony. But when I have set before me, as I did the other night, a beautiful and delicious piece of banana cream pie (or doughnuts), I do not believe that God specifically wills that I either do or do not eat that specific piece of banana cream pie. Rather, God wills that I be at my mental, spiritual, and physical best at all times, and he has given me intelligence with which to determine whether or not I can eat that piece of banana cream pie and be at my mental, spiritual and physical best. He wills that I do nothing which will destroy my effectiveness as his servant. He wills that I do everything that will improve my effectiveness as his servant. He has given me freedom to decide. He has also warned me that if I make the wrong decision, there are certain consequences I shall have to pay.

You and I see most of the events that happen in our world through a glass, darkly. Yet we constantly judge them; this is good, that is bad, this was the will of God, why did God let that happen, why doesn't God do something to prevent this from happening? As we do this we are judging God, instead of being cognizant of the fact that God is continually judging us. We say we want the will of God to be done, but what we so often mean is, we want God to do what we think ought to be done. We try to impose our will on God.

III

Now let us put all of this in terms of the life and death of Jesus. When God sent Jesus into the world, He willed that men should follow Jesus, not crucify him. His ultimate intent and purpose was that all men should become Christlike and develop rich, full, abundant lives, not that they should go around crucifying the best that they know. Thus it was God's will that Christ should be victorious in his battle against evil in the hearts of men. But men would not listen to Christ. The powers that be reviled him and persecuted him. Under those circumstances, what was the will of God? Certainly not that Jesus should shrink from this crisis and run away, but that he should face it, and if necessary, die. Jesus was free to make this decision for himself. He did not find it easy to make: "Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me." Because he was the man he was, he saw that facing the Cross was the only way for him to fulfill God's purpose for his life, and the completion of his mission required the Cross.

IV

Now how can you and I be more certain than we often are what is God's purpose and goal for our lives?

There are several things we can do which will help us know the will of God. Most important of all, of course, is to deepen our own friendship and fellowship with God so that we may know him better than we now do. Dr. Leslie Weatherhead gives this example. When a group of people are together and they want to give a present to a mutual friend, someone will suddenly say, "Well, I think I know him better than anyone else, and I think this is what he would like." You see, the better we get to know another person, and the better we get to know God, the more we understand what he would like, what he would will for us,- what is required of us if we are to please him. Nothing can substitute for a closer, deeper fellowship with God. This comes as we deepen our life of prayer and meditation, as we study those who know him better than we know him, and see his activity in their lives.

But there is another way. Paul wrote about it in this letter to the Roman Christians which we shared a few moments ago. He says there is a way in which we can prove what is the will of God. What is that way? By putting the moral and spiritual teachings of Jesus Christ to the test in our own lives. Here are some of the things Paul tells us we must do if we would be Christlike:

Don't cherish exaggerated ideas of yourself.

Use your talents and abilities in the service of others.

Have a warm affection for other people.

Endure your trials patiently.

Maintain the habit of prayer.

Live in harmony with other people.

Don't return evil for evil.

Don't take vengeance into your own hands.

Don't be overpowered by evil.

Do these things, says Paul, live this kind of life, and when you do so, you will develop, and grow, and mature in such a way that you will become absolutely convinced in your own mind that this way of life is the will of God for you. You prove God's will by doing it!

Dr. Leslie Weatherhead once wrote a book entitled The Will of God, the best little book on the subject I know anything about. In a chapter near the end of that book, given the same title as this sermon, he makes two very important observations. The first one he introduces with a story with which you may be familiar, the story of the minister who was invited to a new and much larger church. Being a devout man, he spent many hours in prayer, seeking God's will in the matter. A parishioner met his son on the street and asked what his father was going to do about the call: "Well," said the little boy, "father's praying, but mother's packing."

How easy it is to fool ourselves, to make ourselves think that what we want so badly must be the will of God. There is no one of us who does not frequently fall victim to this temptation.

But the second point made by Dr. Weatherhead is even more important for he asks the question of himself, as we must all ask it of ourselves; "When we discover what we believe to be the will of God and what it is that we must do if we would fulfill that will, have we got the courage to do it?"

I think of an analogy. When my children were younger, they used to play card tricks, and many times they would put some cards in front of me and say, "Select any card you want." Just as I was about to select one, they would often say, "No, not that one."

How often in our lives do we make a partial commitment to God and say, "God, I will do thy will whatever the cost, only reveal to me what that will is." Then he does reveal his will and we are tempted to say, "Oh, God, anything but that." He who would know the will of God must do the will of God, and the more we do God's will in the little things, the more certain we shall be of knowing his will in the time of greatest crisis.