



Roanoke, Virginia
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“The Will of the Father”

Matthew 7:21-29

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²¹ “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. ²² On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?’ ²³ Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.’

²⁴ “Everyone then who hears these words of mine and acts on them will be like a wise man who built his house on rock. ²⁵ The rain fell, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, because it had been founded on rock. ²⁶ And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not act on them will be like a foolish man who built his house on sand. ²⁷ The rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell—and great was its fall!”

²⁸ Now when Jesus had finished saying these things, the crowds were astounded at his teaching, ²⁹ for he taught them as one having authority, and not as their scribes.

You just heard the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount. Maybe some of you would like me to jump right to the ending of my sermon, but that isn’t going to happen. I do want you to remember, though, that what is said at the end has everything to do with what was said before.

The conclusion was a little scary, wasn’t it? “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven.” “Not everyone who God-talks is going to enter the kingdom of heaven.”

Maybe it’s just me. Maybe I think it was a little scary because I say, “Lord, Lord,” many Sundays from the pulpit, or in front of a class, and when people want to talk to me about my faith. I offer prayers in Jesus’ name.

I could hide behind my qualifications: I have a seminary degree. I have a doctorate in God-Talk. I know the Bible better than most. But that doesn’t help here. Because I know the Bible better than most, I know that Jesus is paraphrasing Ezekiel and Jeremiah. Those two prophets were sick of people in high “church” places telling people in privilege and power- especially kings- what they want to hear... justifying this royal policy or that one with the blessing of God’s name... giving spiritual cover for royal policies Ezekiel and Jeremiah see leading to international instability and Judah’s ruin.

The quotes are a bit different, but this is what they both say using Jeremiah's quote: "They dress the wound of my people as though the wound was not serious. 'Peace, peace,' they say, when there is no peace."

Substitute the word "Lord" for "Peace" and you basically have what Jesus says. Jesus paraphrases those prophets because he sees religious authorities of his own day offering biblical validation for unbiblical actions.

- Some Zealots want to kill Romans.
- Some Pharisees want to impose rules on personal behavior nearly impossible to keep.
- Some Priests divide the righteous and the condemned between those who support the Temple and those who do not.
- Some of Herod's crew demand allegiance to their rule as a test of faith.
- And many ordinary Jews of all types want to do the same between pure bloods and half-bloods; Jews and Samaritans.

Jesus is distressed at how some religious Jews rationalize being hateful to others. He is distressed about the ways people are mean-spirited, justifying harsh words and treatment, in the name of God: Jews to Romans, Jews to Samaritans, Pharisees and Priests to each other, men to women...

Imagine Jesus turning suddenly on his heels to stare out the window of the biblical world into the room that is today's world.

- Would he see the husband hitting his wife to correct her because God says she is to be submissive to him?
- Would he see the rich couple claiming God's blessings on their success and God's justice on those who sinned by being poor?
- Would he see the one who looks for God in the woods or on the beach and doesn't bother to look for God next door or in the part of town they avoid?
- Does he see the minister who loves to attach God's name to particularly strong opinions and pass them off as the latest missives from God?
- Would Jesus see the same evidence of love grown cold as he does in his day?

If you believe as I do in the living Jesus, I think Jesus is looking our way.

I love what Fred Craddock said of this passage. He chose an easy target, but his image was compelling. Craddock imagined TV ministers hawking their holy-soaked wares:

- prayer cloths... maybe patches of a revival tent that has absorbed the holiness of the preacher's sermons, and the prayers and hymns of those who heard him;
- wallets that have been blessed so that they'll swell with the monetary bounty of God's blessings;
- holy oil to cure the body when applied on the wound or holy water to cure the guilty conscience when applied to the forehead.

Craddock imagines the listeners sitting in their dens "with the window blinds drawn so that none of the world's needs can be seen outside." They place their orders with the assurance that God's blessings can be received, unwrapped and enjoyed as soon as the postal service or FedEx delivers

the *Word of the Lord*. Hey, a preacher who has the amazing authority of thousands, maybe millions of viewers, must be doing something right.

In a sermon a few weeks ago, I said that in our media culture it is easy to find everything and hard to believe anything. With so many people out there telling us what is the Will of the Father...

- what God would have us believe and do,
- buy or boycott,
- march for or against...;

what can we believe about the Will of the Father that will help us know the joy Jesus promises and avoid the harsh consequences he warns of?

We can come up with the beginnings of good answers, you know. I say this knowing that I could be thought of as just one more preacher attaching the Lord's name to my own opinions.

But let's remember something here. Our passage is the conclusion of the *Sermon on the Mount*. So, you want to know what Jesus thinks is the will of the Father in Heaven? Just go back and read his sermon.

Jesus does us a double favor with his sermon. His first favor, I've already talked about because it is in his conclusion. He gives us permission not to believe every package with a God-ribbon around it that is handed us. We can, without guilt, dismiss many ungodly claims made in God's name, no matter how rich, famous, quoted or credentialed is the one saying it.

The other favor Jesus does us is in the rest of the sermon when he actually gives some real, concrete direction on what it means to do the Will of the Father.

Start at the beginning with the beatitudes. "Blessed are the meek, the truly humble." What is God's will? He wants us to be humble, not arrogant. God's will is that we know our need for God- our need for God's forgiveness, for God's Word to continually break through our assumptions, for God's Spirit to continually remind us that we are not better than the others God loves- that they and we have dignity and value, not because any of us are "little gods" but because we are God's children.

"Blessed are those who grieve," Jesus says. Blessed are those who grieve honestly, facing loss and admitting pain, whether it is the loss of a loved one or the loss of a beloved ideology, bias, or assumption. Blessed are those who grieve rightly because they are better able to move on, claiming comfort and hope without feeling like they are betraying who or what they have lost.

"Blessed are those who show mercy." "Blessed are those who make peace." And, "blessed are those who bear the cost of showing mercy and making peace; those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake."

Jesus moves from beatitudes to identity statements. "Be salt," he says. "Be light." Add something to the table of life that has moral and ethical flavor. Be a lamp or lightbulb through which there shines the hope of Christ for those without it, guidance for those who need it.

He goes on to talk about what living out this identity means. "You have heard it said, don't kill." I say, "Don't hate."

You have heard, "Don't commit adultery." I say, "Don't lust. Don't treat others as objects rather than persons."

"Love your enemy," he says (maybe the strongest thing he says in his sermon). You have heard, "An eye for an eye." But I say, "Revenge and retaliation? Don't go there. Practice reconciliation. If you come to worship to celebrate your reconciliation with God and you're at odds with your sibling, go seek reconciliation with your sister... your brother."

“At least try it. Return evil with grace and see what happens. Just try being the ethical adult in these situations and maybe you’ll see a miracle happen between you and another. And if the miracle isn’t with the other, maybe the miracle will be within you as you stop carrying this terrible hatred and bitterness with you that clouds your mind, speeds your heart and corrupts your joy.”

Part of this might mean realizing that when there is enmity and bitterness, you probably are part of the problem. Friends tell friends where there is a piece of kale stuck between teeth. Jesus says: “You want to be judgmental about that speck in another’s eye?” Jesus asks. “You need to know, there is a log in our own.”

Want to pray about it? Great. Go off and pray without making a big show about it. But that doesn’t mean prayer is just between you and God because you’re to pray like this: “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven;” which means moving from prayer to action; forgiving others’ sins because God has forgiven you.

It’s clear, isn’t it, that the one who talks the faith but doesn’t live it has a hard time finding a place to sit and be comfortable in this sermon... and I would add in all of Matthew’s Gospel. Tea is not served on the porch and a bed is not made so that the one who thinks faith is just between her and God can move in. Go to Luke’s Gospel to find a gentler Jesus. For the Jesus who preaches this sermon, it is almost as if confessions of faith without the witness of life don’t count. Such words are salt-less, light-less. What matters is not God-Talk but a God-Walk; doing the will of the father; which over and over again has to do with how we treat others.

If you think I’m wrong on this, please read the sermon for yourself; chapters 5-7 of Matthew’s Gospel. You’ll see that Jesus means it when he says that Christians are not supposed to think like, behave like, or treat others in a rude and mean-spirited way. He promises God’s joy if you live in the way he describes.

And, here is the scary part of the sermon driving home the point that he really means it: in his sermon, he threatens eternal fire if you don’t.

I’m not a fire and brimstone preacher, and my hope is in the cross. At the cross, Jesus practices what he preached in the Sermon on the Mount when he forgives the mean-spirited and hateful people who conspired to have him hang. But if we are going to let this particular sermon speak for itself, then we can’t miss Jesus describing harsh consequences for those who live in a way that ignores the suffering of others. Right now, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is just not having it.

Let’s end the sermon on a positive note, though. Yes, we all need God’s mercy, and if we are not called to confession and a desire to think and live in a more gracious and merciful way, then the sermon has not done its work in our selfish hearts and closed minds. But let’s not forget Jesus’ promise of joy to those who do the will of the Father in heaven.

Maybe we can speak of the joy of doing the will of the Father using Father’s Day as a prism. Parenting can be lip service; claiming a child but not supporting, nurturing, or being a part of that child’s life. It can simply be a biological conclusion of shared DNA. Or, parenting can be a means of living out one’s baptismal identity.

In the spirit of worship of God the Father, in the spirit of Grove’s baptism in this service, and in the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount, I offer the traditional “Happy Father’s Day” as beatitudes:

- “Happy are fathers- Happy are all of us- who love children in ways that show kindness and reconciliation.”

- “Happy are parents- Happy are all of us- who know that children represent all who are vulnerable and thus, who put children’s needs before their own.”
- “Happy are parents- Happy are all of us- who show mercy, who suffer for children’s sake, who show reconciling love that God shows us in Jesus Christ.”

“Happy are they, for they are doing the will of our Father in heaven.”