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Matthew 26:36-46
October 23, 2016

There Are 2 Kinds of People in the World: Which Kind Are You?

It was Friday afternoon, October 1st, 2004. I was playing Cribbage with Ruth Covell, one of our older members.

I got a call. It was my dad. My mom had had a stroke and was in John Muir hospital in Walnut Creek.

I got in my car and rushed to the hospital as quickly as Friday traffic allowed, praying all the way up that she would be okay.

My mom was not in good shape. She couldn't talk but for a few words. She couldn't swallow.

She'd had a pretty massive stroke. But ... others had come back from a stroke, I knew and I was sure that she would too.

I was up at the hospital almost every day.

My mom's spirits were pretty good. She even flirted with the male doctors and nurses which surprised the whole family as she was generally very refined.

However, we were told it was a result of her stroke and that the part of her brain that controlled inhibition had been compromised and this was not unusual.

You go mom!

But as the days went on, it was obvious that she was not going to come back from the stroke. She would be paralyzed and would need a feeding tube.

Couldn't God hear my prayers?

On Friday, a week after her stroke, DeLynn and I were to fly to New York City to officiate at the wedding of David Young and Sarah Hardy.

David had been a long time member here, was actually on the pastor nominating committee that called me to this church, and had only recently moved to New York.

After discussing it with my mom, she assured me she would be fine (as much as she was able) until I returned Sunday evening.

I prayed some more and decided to go to New York and do the wedding.

Saturday night, around 2 a.m., the phone in my hotel room rang and I feared the worst. It was my siblings.

I was right. My mom had died. I was devastated. I should have been there with her!

I was mad at my siblings. I was mad at my mom. And I was mad at God.

Maybe you've had a similar experience.

You have stood beside the bed of a loved one and prayed for their healing or at the very least that they would stay around for a while.

For sure, you weren't ready to let go.

Or maybe it was a time in your life you were so distressed, you didn't know what words to use when you prayed.

Or perhaps there have been times in your life when you have not prayed at all because you were afraid of the answer God would give.

What if we ask for guidance and he guides us in ways we don't want to follow?

What if we pray for wisdom and the wisdom we receive seems more like nonsense?

What if we pray for patience and the answer means nothing but trouble for us?

What if we pray for something that is our will, but not God's, what then?

Jesus suggests we stick with God's will. In the prayer we looked at last week, *The Lord's Prayer*, are the words: "*Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*" (Matthew 6:10)

When you think about it, though, that can be a problem for us. A problem that can be seen, if we lay it out in a series of logical statements. See if this makes sense:

1. God has a will concerning my life.
2. God's will encompasses his desires for my life.
3. But I also have a will that encompasses my desires for my life.
4. Those two wills are often in conflict with each other.
5. When there is a conflict, either God's will or my will will prevail.
6. When I pray, "Thy will be done," I am asking for God's will to prevail over my will.

That's the basic difficulty we face when we pray. When we ask that God's will be done, we are implicitly asking that our wills be overturned, if necessary.

It's not easy to pray that way when you're standing beside the hospital bed of someone you love. Or you are in New York and they are in California.

But that's only part of the problem. Jesus taught us to pray that God's will might be done "on earth as it is in heaven."

In heaven, God's will is *always* done; in heaven, God's will is *instantaneously* done; in heaven, God's will is *completely* done; in heaven, God's will is *joyfully* done. At least, that's the way I imagine it.

But God's will is rarely done on earth. After all, there are over six billion wills on the earth and only one will in heaven.

Just look around you. Do you see God's will being done?

Pick up the newspaper and read about another terrorist attack.

Read about the slaughter in Aleppo, the killings in Yemen, the corruption in banks, government, and businesses ...

And the lies, all the lies, especially during this election year (let me tell you, the fact checkers are having a field day).

It certainly looks like anybody but God's will is being done.

In some ways, "Thy will be done" seems like the most hopeless of all prayer requests.

Seldom do we mean it. Seldom does it seem to be answered.

And maybe that's why "Thy will be done" is a difficult prayer to pray sincerely.

Even though Jesus himself instructed us to use these words, there are at least four reasons why we find it difficult to do so.

First, it is hard to pray, "Thy will be done" because it means giving up control of your own life.

Let's go back to that little series of statements again:

1. God has a will (or desire) for your life.
2. But you also have a will (or desire) for your life.
3. When you pray, "Your will be done," you are asking that his will take precedence over yours.

Only one will can be done at a time. Either God calls the shots or you call the shots. Either he is in control or you are in control.

It's not easy to pray like that because it means giving up control of your own life.

But we aren't really in control anyway. It only seems that way.

I recently read the story of Bob Pierce, who founded *World Vision*, the Christian relief organization that has helped millions of people around the world.

As I read his story, it struck me that he was an unlikely man to found and lead such a large organization.

He didn't have much education and he lacked many of the so-called social graces. In fact, he called himself a second-rater.

When asked the secret of his life, though, he said that in his early years as a Christian he prayed like this:

“O God, I give you the right to change my agenda any time you like — and you don’t have to inform me in advance. Amen.”

That’s the kind of prayer God can answer because it’s based on the truth that God is God and God has the absolute right to do whatever God wants.

Many of us are unhappy because we’re fighting God at the point of his sovereignty. We’ve never surrendered our agenda to his control.

I certainly hadn’t. I didn’t care about God’s will concerning my mom, I cared about mine. I didn’t want to give up that control!

It didn’t matter that her quality of life had been deeply compromised. I wanted MY WILL be done. At least until I returned to California.

Then there’s another reason why it’s hard to pray, “Thy will be done.” It is because we often doubt that God wants the best for us, right?

If the first reason (giving up control) touches our will, the second one touches our mind. The first reason was practical; the second is theological.

Often we’re scared that if we give God control of our lives, He’ll mess it up somehow. We wouldn’t say it that way, but that’s how we really feel.

More than once I have heard people say, “Pray for the opposite of what you want, because God always gives us the opposite of what we ask for.”

We laugh when we read that, because it seems so absurd. But many of us secretly wonder if it isn't true.

We've all known the frustration of unanswered prayer.

Perhaps it was for something small, like for God to give you a puppy.

Or something bigger, like asking God to open the door for you to get a certain job.

Or perhaps it was for something truly big: prayer requested at the bedside of a loved one (like my mom), prayer for a wayward child, prayer for a failing marriage.

When God doesn't answer our prayers, or when God doesn't answer in the way we want him to, aren't we tempted to wonder if God is there?

And if he is there, is he listening?

And if he is listening, does he care?

Millions of people, including millions of apparently loyal churchgoers, secretly wonder if the answer to that question might be no.

A God who is there – sure. A God who cares for me – maybe not.

Now you might wonder if this doesn't reveal a kind of spiritual schizophrenia.

I mean, how can you answer yes to one question and no (or maybe not) to the other?

If there is a God, surely he cares about me. And if he doesn't care for me, who cares whether there's a God or not?

How do you pray, “Thy will be done” when you aren’t sure that God really cares for you?

If you knew, really knew, that God had your best interests at heart, you might dare to pray that way.

But as long as you doubt, that prayer will be challenging, at the very least.

There are many answers to the question, “does God really care for me?”

But there is only one that really matters. It’s the answer God gave 2,000 years ago on a hill outside the city walls of Jerusalem.

It is when God let his own son die for you... and me.

And so God says, “Do you still wonder if I love you?”

That’s why the most crucial word of the Lord’s Prayer is in the very first phrase, “Our Father in heaven.”

To call God *Father* means that you recognize what he did when he gave his own Son to die on the cross.

God is worthy to be called “Father” precisely because he has done what good fathers must do.

He sacrificed the best he had for the welfare of his children.

That’s the second reason why this prayer is difficult. Many of us doubt that God truly cares for us.

The third reason moves us into a completely different arena.

It is hard to pray, “Thy will be done” because God’s will sometimes involves suffering and pain.

That was true for Jesus. It's Thursday night. It is late – perhaps 10:30 or 11:00 p.m.

The Lord has retreated to his favorite spot – the olive groves in Gethsemane.

Leaving Peter, James, and John behind, He wrestles in prayer with what is about to happen.

He knows with the perfect knowledge of omniscience that the time has come for him to die. All is revealed; nothing is hidden.

Nothing will surprise him – not Judas' betraying kiss, not Caiaphas' mocking words, not Pilate's curious questions.

The pain, the blood, the anguish – all of it is as clear to him as if it had already happened.

Most of all he sees the darkness. Sin like a menacing cloud hovers over him.

As Jesus sees the cup filled with pain and brokenness, he recoils.

These are his words: *My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet, not as I will, but as you will.* (Matthew 26:39).

These are not the words of unbelief. They are words of faith. They are the words of a man who understands fully what it will cost to do the will of God.

Was it wrong for Jesus to pray this way? Did it somehow reveal a lack of trust in God? I don't think so.

No one was ever more committed to doing the will of God. He did not pray because he wished to be released from the will of God.

He prayed because he knew how much the will of God would cost him personally.

He was willing to pay the price, but in the horror of seeing the “cup” of suffering draw near, he asked that it might be removed from him.

If Jesus struggled with the will of God, should we be surprised if we do the same?

If it was difficult for Jesus to pray, “Thy will be done,” is it likely to be any easier for us, knowing what might be in store?

And then finally it is hard to pray, “Thy will be done” because you are praying against the status quo.

God’s will is seldom done on the earth. Too many things that go on are obviously not God’s will.

Abortion ... crack babies ... broken homes ... rampant pornography ... men starving, women freezing, children wearing rags ... racial prejudice ... ethnic hatred.

Sometimes, it seems as if God has gone to sleep and evil has taken over. But, God does not accept the status quo.

He does not accept that sin should reign forever on earth. He does not accept that the killing should go on forever.

God does not sit idly by while the world goes to hell.

God does not accept the status quo!

To pray, “Thy will be done” is to follow God in opposing the status quo. This prayer goes against the grain.

In a world where God's will is not done, we are to pray that God's will will be done.

All too often when we pray, "Thy will be done," we do it with an air of pious resignation:

"O God, since I am helpless to stem the tide of events, may your will be done."

Sometimes, we use it as an excuse not to get angry at the sin and suffering all around us.

But if God does not accept the status quo, neither should we! To pray, "Thy will be done" is an act of God-ordained rebellion!

This is not a prayer for the weak or the timid. This is a prayer for troublemakers and rabble-rousers.

It is a prayer for those who look at the devastation all around them and who say, "I'm mad as hell, and I'm not going to take it anymore!"

It is a prayer, then, that leads necessarily to action. If you see injustice being done, you cannot blithely pray, "Thy will be done" and then walk away.

If you really mean, "Thy will be done," you've got to jump into the fray and help make it happen.

It's not wrong to struggle with this prayer. After all, Jesus struggled with it himself.

But over the years I've discovered that the most joy-filled people are those who have said, "I've decided to let go and let God run my life."

So many of us go through life with a clenched fist, trying to control the uncontrollable, trying to mastermind all the circumstances, trying to make our plans work.

So we hold tightly to the things we value – our career, our reputation, our happiness, our health, our children, our education, our wealth, our possessions, even our spouses.

What are you struggling with right now?

What are you holding on to so tightly that it almost makes your hands hurt?

What is it that you are afraid to give to God?

Whatever it is, you'll be a lot happier if you finally say, "Your will be done" and open your clenched fist.

But, you'll never know until you let go.

C. S. Lewis said, "There are two kinds of people in the world, and only two kinds: those who say to God, 'Your will be done' and those to whom God says in the end, 'Your will be done.'

"Which kind are you?"

Here's a simple prayer that may help you loosen your grip on the things with which you are struggling:

O Lord, thy will be done. Nothing more, nothing less, nothing else.

Amen.

As always, we who pray that prayer are called by God to be part of the answer.

There is a couplet I love that goes like this: Pray as if everything depends on God and then work as if everything depends on me.

Thy will be done ... in my life, in my family, in my finances, in my career, in my children, in my dreams for the future, in my words, in my friendships, in my world.

When we pray that way, God will always be pleased to answer us.

The answer may not be what we want or what we expect, but the answer *will* come, and we will not regret having asked.

And best of all, when we pray that way, we are doing our little part to make the earth a little more like heaven and a little less like hell.

Amen.