

“DOING GOD’S WILL”

Today, we resume our study of the Gospel of Mark. In the previous sermons in this series, we have reflected upon topics such as: the way Mark introduces Jesus; the beginnings of Jesus’ public ministry; Jesus’ summoning of certain men to be part of his inner circle of followers; Jesus’ teachings on the topics of fasting and the observance of the Sabbath day; and the growing opposition towards Jesus among Israel’s religious leadership. But this opposition was not limited to the religious leaders. In Mark 3:20-21, we saw that Jesus’ own family looked at his popular ministry and controversial teachings and concluded that he had gone off his rocker. They thought he had lost his mind, and they felt that it was their duty to reel him in. Those earlier verses in Mark 3 suggest that when Jesus’ mother and brothers came to see him in this passage, they were not just paying him a social visit. They wanted to get him under control. They wanted to put a stop to all of the noise that he was making. After all, they were not deaf and dumb. They saw the way in which Israel’s religious authorities were responding to Jesus, and they knew that trouble was brewing.

This helps us make better sense of how Jesus responded when he was told that his family was seeking him. Otherwise, we might think that he was not exactly honoring his mother when he said “Who are my mother and my brothers?” Here is one of the many tensions with which Scripture often confronts us. On the one hand, the Bible says that we have to honor our parents. And elsewhere in the Gospels, we see Jesus doing precisely that. John even tells us that Jesus made arrangements from the cross for one of his

disciples to take care of the mother that he was leaving behind [John 19:25-27]. But the Bible also says that family loyalty is not absolute. When loyalty to family comes into conflict with loyalty to God, we should always be faithful to God, even though doing so may alienate us from parents and family. The biblical call to honor and submit to our parents is subordinate to the call to honor and obey the Lord. And this principle has an even broader application: *all of our obligations to other people, obligations to family, to friends, to employers, to nations, to anyone or anything else, all such obligations rank below the obligation that we owe to God.*

This principle is one of the hard truths of Christian discipleship. Christian women who are married to non-Christian husbands face the challenge of having to submit to their husbands while also directing their supreme devotion and loyalty to Jesus Christ. Those who convert to biblical Christianity from a different religious tradition, whether it be Roman Catholicism, Judaism, secularism, Islam, Hinduism or something else, such people often have to worry about being ostracized by their parents for abandoning the family religion. Christian young people sometimes face tensions with peers, like when they have to explain why they cannot participate in a certain activity on a Sunday because they need to be at worship on the Lord's Day. No one denies the difficulty of these situations. But the Bible is very clear: our loyalty to God must be above all our other loyalties. For when it is not, when we allow our allegiance to family or friends or anything else to overshadow what we owe to God, then we are not really being loyal to God at all. The teaching of our Lord is very clear: he demands our supreme loyalty.

We find a stirring example of such devotion in the story of Francis of Assisi. Francis was born in the late 12th century to a wealthy merchant in the town of Assisi in central Italy. He grew up under great privilege, and became a charming and very popular young man. But things changed after he was on the losing side in a battle. After being held captive for over a year until a ransom was paid for his release, he came home with a serious sickness. As he struggled through several months of illness, Francis became very troubled about the state of his soul and he greatly feared the prospect of standing before the Lord on the Day of Judgment. When he recovered, he gradually grew in his resolve to spend his life serving the sick and diseased, even lepers, in the name of Christ. As you might imagine, such a humble way of life did not meet with the approval of his wealthy father, and it eventually resulted in Francis being taken before the bishop to be disinherited. To this, Francis responded by taking off the rich clothes his father had given him and declaring that from that day forwards he desired only to serve “our Father which art in heaven.” [Hannula, 95f; Latourette, vol. 1, 429] Francis understood that the loyalty that he owed his heavenly Father superseded the loyalty that he owed his earthly father.

That is one of the lessons we learn from this passage. Another is this: *outward association with Jesus counts for nothing, because the only people who truly belong to him are those who do the will of God.* Jesus’ mother and brothers were outwardly associated with him, they were even blood relatives, but that didn’t matter. They were not just on the outside of the house in which Jesus was meeting with his followers, but

they were spiritual outsiders as well. They did not always remain so, since we learn from elsewhere in the New Testament that James and Jude had roles of leadership in the early church. But in this passage, they were not living as the Lord's disciples. And this is why Jesus spoke of them as if they were not really a part of his true family.

This relates to one of the perennial problems that afflicts the church in all ages: the tendency of some within the church to think that mere outward affiliation with the church, or mere inward affirmation of a set of beliefs, is enough to ensure that you are one of God's people. It is the problem of nominalism, the problem of being a member of God's people in name only, and not in terms of the kind of life that you live before God. It is a problem that takes different forms at different times and places. We see it in the book of Jeremiah, when the prophet warns Israel against believing that God's judgment will not come upon unfaithful Jerusalem simply because the temple of the Lord was in the city [Jeremiah 7:4]. We see it in the book of Revelation, where Jesus said to the church in Sardis, "you have the reputation of being alive, but you are dead." [Revelation 3:1] And we see it in the writings of Augustine, who tells of a man named Victorinus, who called himself a Christian but was unwilling to affiliate with the visible church, for fear of offending his pagan friends. Augustine writes of how Victorinus was confronted by a priest named Simplicianus, who responded to his claim to be a Christian by saying: "I shall not believe it, or count you to be a Christian until I see you in the Church of Christ." [Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 95] This last example is helpful because it shows us that the sin of nominalism can take place in two basic ways. Some people

presume themselves to be Christians on the basis of their church membership and attendance, yet they do not have a living faith in Jesus Christ. They say, ‘I go to church. I contribute to its work. I try to do some good deeds. God is happy with that. I don’t need to cultivate a life of daily communion with the Lord. What I do is enough.’ On the other hand, other people presume themselves to be Christians on the basis of their general assent to a set of beliefs, yet they do not have a living faith in Jesus Christ either. They say, ‘I believe in God. I believe in Jesus. I know I am going to heaven. I don’t need to worry about things like worship, or prayer, or reading the Bible, or being holy, or being a part of the church.’ One kind of nominal Christian is at home in the church, while the other is equally at home outside the church. But the true spiritual condition of both is the same: they claim to be alive but they are really dead; they do not really belong to Jesus Christ.

Jesus says that the mark of a true Christian is that he or she does the will of God. We find similar teachings elsewhere in the New Testament. In Matthew 7:21, Jesus says, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.” In John 9:31, he says, “We know that God does not listen to sinners, but if anyone is a worshiper of God and does his will, God listens to him.” And 1 John 2:17 reads, “the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.” Such passages indicate that the Christian life can be summed up as doing the will of God.

Now, when we read passages like this, we often get uneasy. We hear Jesus saying that the only people who will go to heaven are those who do the will of God, or saying that there will be people on the Day of Judgment who claim him as their Lord but to whom he will respond by saying, “I never knew you; depart from me” [Matthew 7:23], we hear Jesus saying such things and we become uncomfortable. And often, our first impulse is often to take comfort in reminding ourselves that salvation is not obtained by works, but by God’s grace alone and through faith alone. And this is certainly true. Salvation is by grace alone, not by any human merit. And the only way we can lay hold of this salvation is through faith in Jesus Christ. The Bible says this in many, many places. But it is not what the Bible says here, in this particular passage. We need the teaching of this passage, and others like it, every bit as much as we need those passages that talk about salvation by grace alone and through faith alone. If we embrace one set of texts and ignore the other, we will not have a biblical understanding of salvation.

The Christian life is a life lived in obedience to God. As Calvin wrote, the doctrine of salvation must “enter our heart and pass into our daily living, and so transform us into itself that it may not be unfruitful for us.” [*Institutes*, 3.6.4] If we are truly united to Jesus Christ, if we are the branches and he is the tree, then our lives will bear fruit, the fruit of doing God’s will. It is not about doing a few good works in order to satisfy some supposed minimum set of requirements. Christian obedience is not about earning favor with God. It can’t be, because not even our best works are pure enough to be acceptable to God. If we think of our obedience as something that earns God’s favor, then the

minimum requirement is absolute perfection. No, Christian obedience is about living as a new creation in Jesus Christ. It is about having a renewed heart, with renewed desires.

The gospel is not about finding ease for our consciences by lowering God's standards. It is about Christ removing the condemnation that we deserve under the law and then filling us with his Spirit, who writes God's law on our hearts. The Spirit makes us love God's law, because he shows us that it is good. A true Christian will want to do the will of God. He delights in doing God's will. And when he doesn't delight in it, he will come under conviction for his lack of desire and ask God to renew his heart.

It is also vital that we remember that Christian obedience is not done in reliance upon our own strength, but through our union with Christ. As Paul writes, "[God] is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption. Therefore, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.'" [1 Corinthians 1:30-31] Jesus is everything to us. He is our wisdom, our righteousness, our sanctification, and our redemption. When we lay hold of Christ by faith, we receive all of these things. Christ does not justify anyone whom he does not also sanctify.

Of course, we cannot do God's will unless we know what his will is. And this is why the Bible is the touchstone of the Christian life. God reveals his will to us in the Scriptures. If you want to be a real follower of Jesus Christ, if you want to avoid the pitfall of nominalism, then you need to be a lifelong student of the Word of God.

The most fundamental part of doing the will of God is realizing that it requires you to let go of your own will. Doing God's will means following the example of our Lord when he prayed, "not as I will, but as you will." [Matthew 26:39] The call to Christian discipleship is a call to renounce self so that we might embrace Christ. Robert Bruce, a minister in 16th century Scotland, put it this way:

"Examine your own heart when you will: if there is anything in the world you love better than Christ, if you are not ready to leave father and mother, to leave wife and children, or whatever is most dear to you in this world for Christ's sake, you are not worthy of Him. If you are not ready to cast off whatever estranges you from Christ, you are not worthy of Him." [*The Mystery of the Lord's Supper*, 52]

Bruce knew what he was talking about when he wrote those words. He was born to a Scottish nobleman. His father, like many of his fellow noblemen, remained committed to Roman Catholicism, despite the fact that it had been overthrown as the national religion by that time. Bruce's father made sure that his son received most of his education from Roman Catholic institutions, even sending him to France for university training. But this was to no avail. At some point in his student days, Bruce was converted to the evangelical faith. And soon after he returned to Scotland to begin his work as a lawyer, he was confronted with the fact that he had not heeded a call that he had been hearing

from God for some time: the call to enter into the gospel ministry. His conscience was deeply troubled, until he finally yielded and accepted the fact that God was calling him to the ministry.

It was a decision that would prove to be the source of great trouble for Robert Bruce for the rest of his life, and he knew that this would be the case. He knew that it would mean the end of his expectation of being a leader in the King's court. He knew it would greatly upset his relationship with his family, and perhaps even place his inheritance, which was sizable, in jeopardy. And though, as a young minister, Bruce initially fell into the favor of young king James, things quickly changed once James realized that he could not make Bruce do whatever he wanted. Eventually, the king removed Bruce from his pulpit and forbade him from preaching anywhere in Scotland, upon pain of death. But this was a command that Bruce could not, and did not, obey. As a result, he was first imprisoned, and later banished to one of the remotest parts of Scotland. He faced persecution for the remainder of his days, but he kept on preaching the gospel that God called him to preach.

One day, at the age of 75, as Bruce was having breakfast with his children, he had a keen sense that death was about to come upon him. He asked his daughter, who was about to make him an egg, for a Bible instead. And though his tired eyes could not see the words, he asked her to turn to this passage in Romans 8, which he began to recite by heart:

“For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” [Romans 8:38-39]

And then he spoke these words:

“Set my finger upon these words [the words he had recited from Romans 8]. God be with you my children. I have breakfasted with you, and I shall sup with my Lord Jesus this night. I die believing these words.” [Iain Murray, *A Scottish Christian Heritage*, 57]

How can a man have such earnest confidence at that moment when death is staring him in the face? Where does faith like this come from? It comes from having lived your life doing the will of God, by faith in Jesus Christ.