

Living Within The Will Of God (Continued)

We'll finish chapter 15 this morning. As you know if you were here last week, we've been looking at the passage in Romans 15:22-33. This passage is a narrative of some of the plans of the apostle Paul, but it is also loaded with key insights into the matter of doing the will of God. In verses 22-33, the key phrase that unlocks this passage is in verse 32 and the phrase is "By the will of God." This little phrase was a part of the whole life and ministry of the apostle Paul. **It was the will of God that controlled Paul's life.** He was a servant who did not live to fulfill his own desires but to do the will of God. That is a basic element of Christian living.

Anyone in any service rendered to Christ seeks to do the will of God if indeed they are on target as they ought to be. Paul could conceive of no higher duty, no nobler pursuit, no greater joy than to do the will of God.

Paul was very much like David in the Old Testament. In fact the parallels between Paul and David are numerous. When Paul commits himself to do the will of God we can hear the echo of what David said when he said in Psalm 40:8:

8 I take joy in doing your will, my God, for your law is written on my heart."

That statement was also repeated by the Lord Jesus Christ in Hebrews 10:5-7:

5 That is why Christ, when He came into the world, said, "You did not want animal sacrifices and grain offerings. But you have given me a body so that I may obey you.

6 No, you were not pleased with animals burned on the altar or with other offerings for sin.

7 Then I said, 'Look, I have come to do your will, O God— just as it is written about me in the Scriptures.' "

It was the desire of David to do the will of God. It was the desire of Jesus to do the will of God, and it is equally the desire of Paul to do the will of God, and it should be our desire also. Just as a reminder from what we learned last time, in the opening of 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, and 2 Timothy, Paul introduces himself as an apostle "*by the will of God*."

Paul was chosen as a "*special messenger*" to know the will of God, to do the will of God, and to pass the will of God on to those who would come after him.

In Romans 12:2 Paul writes:

2 Don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let God

transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will know what God wants you to do, and you will know how good and pleasing and perfect his will really is.

The goal of our lives should be to know and follow the perfect will of God. In Ephesians 5:17 (NAS) Paul called Christians to understand:

17 So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

In Ephesians 6:5,6 Paul calls us:

5 Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ;

6 not only while being watched, and in order to please them, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart.

Look at Hebrews 10:36:

36 Patient endurance is what you need now, so you will continue to do God's will. Then you will receive all that he has promised.

All through the New Testament it is basic to Christian living to do the will of God. Now when we speak of the will of God we could be speaking of any one of three dimensions.

1) The sovereign will of God

There is a will of God that never changes. That sovereign will of God relates to God's control of history, to His absolute purpose for history, which is perfectly carried out to fulfillment without variation. God's will determines the history of the universe. The will of God is what the plan of the ages is. This will always be accomplished. God will do what He predetermines to do in the course of history.

2)The moral will of God

The moral will of God has to do with God's desire for obedience to His expressed standard of righteousness. It is bound up in every command in the Bible. When God says you ought to do this and you ought not to do this, that expresses His moral will. His moral will like His sovereign will is revealed in Scripture, but unlike His sovereign will, it is not always done. People are not always faithful to fulfill the moral will of God that comes through His commands in the Bible.

3) God's will for an individual believer's life

This is the individual plan that God has for each Christian's life ministry. This will is not explicitly revealed in the Bible. For this will to be revealed to us we must listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit of God. We must take into consideration the circumstances in which we find ourselves and the options that appear to be open to us. It is this dimension of the personal plan of God for the life of a believer that is Paul's concern here. That is,

knowing the place of service where God would have each believer, being able to see the guiding hand of God's Holy Spirit at work in our lives. That is Paul's specific concern in today's text. Paul was certainly committed to all three aspects of God's will and they do often intersect and interface, but here the emphasis is on God's working in the unfolding of a believer's ministry.

We learn from Paul that one who is in the flow of God's personal plan for his/her life has a ministry marked out by certain elements, and we began looking at those last week. The first was **precision** in Romans 15:20 and 21. One who functions within the will of God has a precision to his/her ministry. There is a very clear structured design and direction for one who is moving within the will of God. The second key element that marks a ministry within the will of God is **providence**. We saw that in Romans 15:22. There is a sense in which God's sovereign will intersects at this point and He controls the circumstances to bring about the expression that is very personal for the individual believer.

One who functions within the will of God is committed to providence; to the moving of God within the circumstances of life, as well as to precision which is a clear focus on the gifts and calling that God has given.

The third element we spoke of last week was one of **planning**. One who serves within the will of God is involved in planning, even though we trust in God's sovereignty, even though we look to God for direction and guidance in all circumstances to bring about His will, we still involve ourselves in careful planning. Commitment to God's sovereign will does not preclude planning and setting goals. The fourth principle that unfolds in this passage giving insight into Paul's heart is the principle of:

4) Priority

The person who is functioning within the will of God has God's priorities. From Romans 15:25-28, as we saw last time, Paul says that in spite of his dreams, or his plans to go to Spain, in spite of his plans to go to the Roman church and get supplies, money, and people and go on to Spain to evangelize an area that had never been evangelized, and to take the message of Christ where it had never been, there is a priority in Paul's heart that he must take care of. That was this matter of taking an offering of money to the Jerusalem church for the relief of the poor saints and the conciliation of the Jewish-Gentile factions within the church.

We therefore see here that one who functions within the will of God, even though he/she is a planner and dreamer with goals or desires, **he/she is still able to commit themselves to the present priority**. Fifthly, there is the element of:

5) Prosperity

There is prosperity for one who functions within the will of God. But it is a long way from the "*prosperity gospel*" preached by so many today. True prosperity, in the center

of God's will, does not mean money, houses, lands, and fame. Prosperity for Paul and for the apostle John was prosperity of the soul. Let's look at 3 John 2, 4:

3 John 1:2, 4, NAS:

2 Beloved, I pray that in all respects you may prosper and be in good health, just as your soul prospers.

4 I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth.

Prosperity of the soul comes from walking in the truth. Prosperity of the soul means to be rich in love, joy, peace, and God's wisdom. It means the satisfaction that comes from a right relationship with God.

Paul knows because of past experience that when the condition of his heart is one of obedience he will receive the blessing of God in his life.

Paul knew he would prosper spiritually when he functioned within the will of God. Precision, providence, planning, priority, and prosperity are all elements of ministry within the will of God. They are the principles that mark the person devoted to pleasing the Lord. Now all of these are positive elements and I would now like to introduce you to a negative element. That will be a sixth principle and we find it in Romans 15:31. It is the principle of:

6) Persecution

It is true that one who is serving within the will of God is going to experience persecution. Let's read Romans 15:30,31:

30 Dear brothers and sisters, I urge you in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me. Do this because of your love for me, given to you by the Holy Spirit.

31 Pray that I will be rescued from those in Judea who refuse to obey God. Pray also that the Christians there will be willing to accept the donation I am bringing them.

In verse 31 Paul asks for prayer that he be protected from those in Judea who are not believers. Paul is asking them to pray that he may be delivered from a very dangerous situation. It was not uncommon for Paul to face danger. As a matter of fact it had become a way of life for him. He was in danger most of the time. There is a powerful passage in 2 Corinthians 6:3-10 where Paul writes:

3 We try to live in such a way that no one will be hindered from finding the Lord by the way we act, and so no one can find fault with our ministry.

4 In everything we do we try to show that we are true ministers of God.

We patiently endure troubles and hardships and calamities of every kind.
5 We have been beaten, been put in jail, faced angry mobs, worked to exhaustion, endured sleepless nights, and gone without food.
6 We have proved ourselves by our purity, our understanding, our patience, our kindness, our sincere love, and the power of the Holy Spirit.
7 We have faithfully preached the truth. God's power has been working in us. We have righteousness as our weapon, both to attack and to defend ourselves.
8 We serve God whether people honor us or despise us, whether they slander us or praise us. We are honest, but they call us impostors.
9 We are well known, but we are treated as unknown. We live close to death, but here we are, still alive. We have been beaten within an inch of our lives.
10 Our hearts ache, but we always have joy. We are poor, but we give spiritual riches to others. We own nothing, and yet we have everything.

Prior to that powerful statement, Paul had affirmed in 2 Corinthians 1:3-7:

3 All praise to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. He is the source of every mercy and the God who comforts us.
4 He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When others are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us.
5 You can be sure that the more we suffer for Christ, the more God will shower us with his comfort through Christ.
6 So when we are weighed down with troubles, it is for your benefit and salvation! For when God comforts us, it is so that we, in turn, can be an encouragement to you. Then you can patiently endure the same things we suffer.

7 We are confident that as you share in suffering, you will also share God's comfort.

Paul now asks the Roman church to pray for Paul and his companions because they are in great danger day after day after day. So what Paul is saying in Romans 15:31 indicates that if a person is living within the will of God and for the glory of God they are going to be persecuted because they are invading the kingdom of Satan. Paul had no idea what the Jews in Jerusalem would do to him but it was very predictable that they would be hostile towards his message. Paul was confrontive and direct. He spoke the truth of God and said what needed to be said without pulling any punches. Because of this he encountered a great amount of persecution and he knew inevitably that on his way back to Jerusalem with money to give the Jerusalem saints, he would receive a hostile reaction from the Jews who hated him.

They hated him because he renounced Judaism. You may remember that at one time he was their hero. He was the guy representing the Jewish establishment going around

killing Christians, imprisoning Christians, and persecuting Christ. Now he is the ultimate traitor. He has become one of them whom he previously had persecuted. Now let's look at a seventh word that characterizes a person who is functioning within the will of God.

7) Purpose

One who serves within the will of God has a very clear purpose. Romans 15:30,31 NRSV:

30 I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in earnest prayer to God on my behalf, 31 that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my ministry to Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints.

Here is the summation of Paul's ministry. Paul is saying, "I plead with you to pray for me that I might carry out my ministry." Why does he ask this? Is it for Paul's own sake? No. Is it for his own safety? No. Is it for the sake of evangelism? No, not really. Paul wants them to pray for him so that he might continue to do his work for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of the Holy Spirit. The thing that motivated Paul was not his own comfort or his own success. **The thing that motivated the apostle Paul was the glory that would go to the Lord Jesus Christ, and his great love for the Holy Spirit.** Why do we teach? Why do we preach? Why do we give? Why do we serve? Why do we do anything? We do it for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ. In 1 Corinthians 9:22,23, Paul writes:

22 When I am with those who are oppressed, I share their oppression so that I might bring them to Christ. Yes, I try to find common ground with everyone so that I might bring them to Christ. 23 I do all this to spread the Good News, and in doing so I enjoy its blessings.

Paul does everything for the Good News that gives glory to the Lord Jesus Christ. Two years earlier Paul had written to the Corinthians in 2 Corinthians 4:5,6:

5 We don't go around preaching about ourselves; we preach Christ Jesus, the Lord. All we say about ourselves is that we are your servants because of what Jesus has done for us.

6 For God, who said, "Let there be light in the darkness," has made us understand that this light is the brightness of the glory of God that is seen in the face of Jesus Christ.

Everything is for the sake of Jesus. Everything is for Christ's sake. He is always the purpose of everything. Paul knew that if he went to Jerusalem with all this money expressing love, and if the church there received him, and if his trip to Jerusalem was successful, Christ would be glorified. Why? **Christ desired Jew and Gentile to be one.** So if Paul could pull that off, that would be to the glory of Christ. For another thing

Christ desired for the church to express love to its own. Such behavior would glorify Christ. Christ would be glorified if the ministry of Paul continued with success. It was Paul's pleasure to suffer persecution in bringing glory to the Lord Jesus Christ.

The second thing Paul says in Romans 15:30 is to request that they pray for him because of the fact that the Holy Spirit has developed the fruit of love within them. This is the only place in the New Testament that this particular phrase is used. **Romans 15:30:**

. . . . Do this because of your love for me, given to you by the Holy Spirit.

In other words Paul is saying, "*because of the fruit of the Spirit of love within you, please join in my struggle against the forces of evil and pray for me.*"¹ Do we have such motives in our prayers and in our service for God? Are we compelled to serve because of what Christ has done for us and because of what the Holy Spirit is doing in us? **We should serve in the will of God to bring honor to Christ and in the power of the Holy Spirit, operating out of the fruits of the Spirit within us.**

There was a deep spirituality that reigned in the heart of Paul. It's a far cry from the shallowness of most Christian service today. Now we've looked at all these elements, all these words: precision, providence, planning, priority, prosperity, persecution, and purpose. There is one more word, one that touches all the rest. The eighth element for serving within the will of God is:

8) Prayer

The person who lives within the will of God is a person of prayer. A person cannot fully know what the will of God is for him or her unless they are constantly in prayer and in the Word. Andrew Murray, a deeply devoted preacher and minister of God who lived in the 1800s, stated this:

*[The minister's] highest calling is not preaching, or speaking, or parochial visitation, but it is to **cultivate the life of God daily**, and to be a witness of what the Lord teaches him and accomplishes in him.*²

In Romans 15:30 we see that Paul realizes that ministry within the will of God is dependent on prayer and that prayer is a battle. Prayer is a war waged against the forces of evil. Keep in mind, however, that, as John Stott reminds us, "*The purpose of prayer is not to bend God's will to ours, but rather to align our will to his.*"³

The Bible teaches us to pray fervently. James wrote in his epistle in James 5:16, NKJ:

*16 Confess your trespasses to one another, and pray for one another, that you may be healed. **The effective, fervent prayer of a righteous man avails much.***

¹ According to John Stott in *Romans*, p. 388.

² Andrew Murray, *The Prayer Life*, pp. 94-95.

³ John Stott, *Romans*, p. 389.

Paul makes a statement in Ephesians after he's been discussing spiritual warfare. Ephesians 6:18-20:

18 Pray at all times and on every occasion in the power of the Holy Spirit. Stay alert and be persistent in your prayers for all Christians everywhere.

*19 And pray for me, too. Ask God to give me the right words as **I boldly explain God's secret plan that the Good News is for the Gentiles, too.***

20 I am in chains now for preaching this message as God's ambassador. But pray that I will keep on speaking boldly for him, as I should.

Just before this, in Ephesians, Paul had spoken about principalities and powers and about the demons that we battle, and the need for armor in the battle. Now in Romans 15 he points out that the most important ingredient in the battle is prayer. He asked the Romans to pray for each other and to pray for him. Paul has three specific requests in mind regarding prayer. We see these in Romans 15:31, 32. The first request is for **deliverance**, in verse 31:

31 Pray that I will be rescued from those in Judea who refuse to obey God.

Paul asks for prayer to protect him from the evil intent of unbelieving Jews. At this time there was the same element of Jewish leadership in Jerusalem that had brought about the crucifixion of Christ. And Paul knows this is what faces him so he asks that they pray for his safety. Let's turn to the book of Acts to get a little better understanding of this Jewish hostility. Acts 9:20:

*20 And immediately Paul began preaching about Jesus **in the synagogues**, saying, "He is indeed the Son of God!"*

Now I would have to equate such boldness as walking into a Jewish synagogue and preaching that Christ is the Son of God to walking into the camp of terrorists and preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Telling them plainly that Jesus was the Son of God. Look at the reaction of the Jews as we continue in verse 21:

21 All who heard him were amazed. "Isn't this the same man who persecuted Jesus' followers with such devastation in Jerusalem?" they asked. "And we understand that he came here to arrest them and take them in chains to the leading priests."

22 Saul's (Paul)⁴ preaching became more and more powerful, and the Jews in Damascus couldn't refute his proofs that Jesus was indeed the Messiah.

23 After a while the Jewish leaders decided to kill him.

24 But Saul was told about their plot, and that they were watching for him

⁴ Parentheses added.

*day and night at the city gate so they could murder him.
25 So during the night, some of the other believers let him down in a large
basket through an opening in the city wall.*

There are other verses we could point out, but we think you get the idea. The bottom line was that the Jews wanted Paul dead, and he lived with that reality constantly. Look at what he says in Acts 20:24 NRSV:

*24 But I do not count my life of any value to myself, if only I may finish my
course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to
the good news of God's grace.*

Self-preservation was not a concern for Paul. But I think you can understand why he would ask God's people to pray for his safety. His desire was to go wherever the Word of God had not been preached so that unbelievers could be led to faith in Christ, in spite of whatever danger might be found in those places. His request for prayer was so that the message could continue to be preached, not for his own protection but so that he could complete his ministry.

A second element to his request for prayer in Romans 15 is for the **success** of the ministry God had given him. Verse 31 NRSV:

That my ministry to Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints.

Isn't this the way to pray for a missionary? Isn't this what we should pray for our own missionaries today? We need to pray for their safety and for the success of their ministries.

The third element is found in verse 32:

*32 Then, by the will of God, I will be able to come to you with a happy
heart, and we will be an encouragement to each other.*

Paul asks them to pray for the **fulfillment of his plans** and that ultimately he might come to share fellowship with them and to rejoice with them over what God had done. Recounting God's victories is a sure way to be encouraged. The Jews knew this as well, for they often repeated Psalm 136, which recounts all that God had done for His people throughout history. Serving in the will of God, believing in the **precision** of gifts and callings, commitment to the **providence** of God as He works out the circumstances, doesn't eliminate the need for prayer. To the contrary, they increase the importance of prayer. You see, standing alone, precision, priorities, purpose, planning, and prosperity all are dangerously close to the corporate model that has replaced prayer and the leading of the Spirit in so many churches and parachurch ministries today. We have to view these P-words as **tools** of the Holy Spirit, not as the primary means by which things are accomplished.

Did Paul's prayers and those of his Roman partners get a positive answer? They sure did! Did Paul experience safety and deliverance? He sure did! When he got to Jerusalem the mob tried to kill him and the Roman soldiers rescued him. Was Paul successful? You better believe it. When Paul got to Jerusalem, look at what happened, as recorded in Acts 21:17:

17 All the brothers and sisters in Jerusalem welcomed us cordially.

Prayers were answered and that is a testimony to the power of prayer. What do you think it takes to serve in the will of God? Is it something mystical? Is it something for an elite few people at a certain level of spiritual life? No, it isn't. Serving in the will of God means that we know our gifts and our callings and we maximize our lives in those areas, that's **precision**. Serving in the will of God means we understand the **providence** of God, which means we never need to worry and fret, because God is in control of **all** the circumstances. Serving in the will of God means we **plan** and set goals **under the guidance of the Holy Spirit**. It also means that we know our **priority** for the moment and that none of our plans for the future cause us to be ineffective for the present. Ministry in the will of God is also marked by **prosperity** and that isn't a matter of how successful we are outwardly or materially, but a matter of being in the place where God blesses.

Doing the will of God also leads to **persecution** because if we're attacking the kingdom of darkness for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ, Satan is going to try and defeat our efforts. But doing the will of God also means **purpose**. We do what we do for the Lord's sake so persecution isn't a big issue to us because what we do we do for His sake. Serving in the will of God requires **prayer** first, last, and all the way through. All of these are elements Paul has pointed out as necessary to serving within the will of God, and we see them working effectively in his life.

Paul, who has just asked the Romans to pray for him, now prays for them in the simple but beautiful benediction that closes the chapter, verse 33:

And now may God, who gives us his peace, be with you all. Amen.

Last week's message, along with this one, may be stimulating a desire in the people in the congregation for guidelines they personally can use to know the will of God in their personal lives. So it would seem appropriate to include some comments along that line.

If it is your desire to do the will of God and these messages have stimulated your curiosity about how to know God's will in your own life, we will take a few minutes here to answer this question. We have seen both last week and in today's message how Paul knew the will of God for his own ministry, and many of those principles apply to you also. But here are some additional specifics:

- 1) **Have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ** as your Lord and Savior. Only then are you in a position for God to lead and direct you.

- 2) **Learn God's Word as well as you can.** Much of God's will for His children is directly revealed in Scripture. Many people forget this and are misled by voices other than God's. A prime illustration of this is a young couple who feel they are madly in love and in whom hormones are raging. They go ahead and have relations without being married and the explanations they give often include, "*It felt right,*" "*We prayed beforehand,*" "*We are planning to get married,*" etc. So they have rationalized mightily to justify their sinful behavior. God's Word is plain on this subject. In many places throughout the Bible God forbids fornication, or having sex outside of marriage. God is gracious and will forgive a couple who asks forgiveness in this area, but they still often have to bear the consequences for their actions.

The Bible also teaches us that God's will for His children includes being honest, having integrity, not gossiping, not being addicted to anything, praying daily, exercising one's spiritual gifts, showing love to everyone, practicing forgiveness, and many other things.

- 3) **Seek to put God first in everything you do and to glorify God in all things. Psalm 37:4, NAS**

Delight yourself in the LORD; and He will give you the desires of your heart.

Philippians 2:13, NLT

For God is working in you, giving you the desire to obey Him and the power to do what pleases Him.

You see, when we are delighting in the Lord and doing our best to follow the revealed will of God, He works in our heart to give us desires that please Him. When we have done all the above, it is safe to follow our heart's desires. Then God has the joy of granting those desires, and we have the excitement of having our heart's desires fulfilled. Isn't that a wonderful plan that only a sovereign and loving God could come up with?

- 4) **Pray, pray, pray.** To know God's will you must be in constant communication with Him. He will guide you along the paths He wants you to take.
- 5) **Know what your own spiritual gifts are.** Any ministry that God is going to lead you into will utilize those gifts. If you attempt to do a ministry that is outside your gifts, you will feel like "*a square peg in a round hole*" and will find the ministry to be a struggle and a burden rather than a delight and joy.
- 6) George Mueller has developed a formula for discerning the will of God in our lives and we have included it in the bulletin.

God is the God who reconciles people to Himself and brings tranquility to the reconciled soul. God makes peace with sinners through Christ. Paul was a man who lived in constant turmoil and yet never lost this sense of peace, because he was a man of prayer and functioned in the will of God. We need to live the same way.