

"God's Will for Your Life" - 1 Thessalonians 4:1-8

As I was preparing for this sermon, I was reminded of a little booklet John MacArthur wrote about 45 years ago. The title: God's Will Is Not Lost. He wrote it, I believe, in frustration over an avalanche of literature that circled around finding God's will for your life: How to find God's will in marriage. How to find God's will in your career. How to find God's will in your family. How to find God's will in what kind of car to buy. Nothing has changed. Do a Google search for "finding God's will" and you will get almost 3 million hits in less than a second. Most of those are techniques for making God conform to your will. How presumptuous!

MacArthur's thesis was that you don't have to go looking for God's will because it is not lost and it never has been.

He has shown you, O man, what is good; And what does the LORD require of you But to do justly, To love mercy, And to walk humbly with your God? (Micah 6:8)

God has not hidden His will. He has clearly stated how He wants us to behave and He wrote it down for us! We're going to look at one such passage today.

In this part of Paul's first Epistle to the Thessalonians, Paul tells us how we Christians are to live a life that is pleasing to God. We won't make it all the way through it this morning, but Lord willing, we're going to make a good start and we'll finish up next week.

But before we begin, I need to explain that in the Bible, the concept of God's will is used in two different ways. Theologians distinguish between God's decretive will and God's prescriptive will.

God's decretive will, or His will of decree refers to those things God has determined to accomplish Himself. He will inevitably carry those things out. He will not fail. Sometimes it is called God's sovereign will. For example, when God said "Let there be light", there was exactly zero chance that light would not come into existence.

There is a great passage in Romans that brings me no end of comfort:

And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified. (Romans 8:28-30)

All that is God's decree, and it cannot fail to come to pass.

God's prescriptive will is different. As the Creator, God has every right to expect certain behaviors from His creatures. He sets before us the way of righteousness, but He doesn't force us to comply. It's God's will that we obey the Ten Commandments, for example. How many of you do so without fail? None of us, of course. God commands us not to steal, but He does not prevent theft from taking place. Human beings have a certain amount of freedom with God's prescriptive will.

That's not to say that there won't be consequences for our disobedience. He prescribes how we should behave, but we can choose whether or not we will comply. We are not puppets on God's strings. What we will be talking about this morning involves God's

prescriptive will. He tells us how to live. Although we could ignore His prescriptive will, we do so at great peril.

So, let's dive into our text this morning.

Finally then, brethren, we urge and exhort in the Lord Jesus that you should abound more and more, just as you received from us how you ought to walk and to please God; for you know what commandments we gave you through the Lord Jesus. (1 Thessalonians 4:1-2)

Jesus has taken care of our salvation. We were all rebels. All of us are guilty of cosmic treason, but Jesus died on the cross to pay the penalty for our treason and we receive mercy when we accept His sacrifice. The work of God is to believe in Him whom He sent. (John 6:29) If you confess that Jesus is your Lord, and believe God has raised Him from the dead, you move from a place of condemnation to a position of salvation, (Romans 10:9) and you become a member of God's own family.

But here's the deal, if you are a child of the King, you need to act like it. You need to remember who you belong to. You need to remember that how you behave reflects on our Lord and Savior. And it grieves me to say that many professing Christians heap shame upon Jesus with their behavior. What comes out of your mouth reflects on Christ. How you conduct your life reflects on Jesus. You are called by His name.

Our goal, as Christians, must be to live in a manner that pleases God. Of course, you will not achieve perfection in this life, but that does not excuse you from trying. We need to abound more and more. That is, you need to draw closer and closer to the model Jesus left for us. The word "abound" is *perisseuō* (*περισσεύω*) in the Greek. It means to super-abound or to excel to the greatest degree.

When Jesus gave the Great Commission, He didn't stop with the command to make converts. In fact, we don't really make converts; that's the Holy Spirit's job. We are to make disciples ... and then we are to be

*... teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you;
(Matthew 28:20)*

You see, obedience matters. Paul goes on to give us a couple direct examples, showing us what this obedience looks like. His first example is directed at sexual morality.

For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you should abstain from sexual immorality; that each of you should know how to possess his own vessel in sanctification and honor, not in passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God; (1 Thessalonians 4:3-5)

For those folks who are struggling to figure out God's will, this should be pretty direct. For this is the will of God, he says. This is what God wants. God wants you to be sanctified. He wants you to be set apart for a holy purpose, set apart from the fallen culture that surrounds us.

The pagan culture of First Century Thessalonica was rotten with sexual immorality. Marital infidelity was the norm, especially for men. Guys were expected to sleep around. Ritual prostitution was considered worship in many of the pagan religions of the day.

I don't know that our culture is that different. The sexual revolution as it has transpired over the past 50 years is incompatible with Biblical Christianity. In the name of liberty, we have subjected ourselves to the bondage of Satan.

I want to be as clear as I can be. Marriage is an institution that was ordained by God. He designed it. He instituted it. And if He is honored, He will bless it.

Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh. (Genesis 2:24)

Marriage is a covenant relationship between a man, a woman and Almighty God.

Marriage is honorable among all, and the bed undefiled; but fornicators and adulterers God will judge. (Hebrews 13:4)

There is a contrast here presented. You can possess your vessel in sanctification and honor, or, you can be possessed by passion of lust. There is no middle ground. There is no question regarding God's desire. You need to flee from all sexual immorality because there are serious consequences for sexual sin. You need to possess your own body in sanctification and honor,

... that no one should take advantage of and defraud his brother in this matter, because the Lord is the avenger of all such, as we also forewarned you and testified. (1 Thessalonians 4:6)

Our culture likes to believe that what goes on between consenting adults has no consequence to others. This is simply not true. Sex is much more than a biological function like eating or drinking. When you engage in sexual sin, you dishonor your body. Your body is to be an instrument of righteousness. If you are a Christian, your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. If you dishonor this temple, you dishonor God; You dishonor the Church. In many ways, you take advantage of and defraud your brother,

When king David fell into the sin of adultery, and was confronted, he confessed with heartfelt contrition. We see that confession in Psalm 51. At one point, he cries:

Against You, You only, have I sinned, And done this evil in Your sight (Psalms 51:4)

Really David? What about Uriah? You had him murdered! What about Bathsheba? She had to endure the pain of losing her child. How can you say that you sinned only against God?

You see, David understood that as heinous as these consequences were, they paled in comparison to the dishonor he brought to his God. God takes His honor seriously. Some might think that what goes on in secret will stay secret. But God is omniscient, and God will not be mocked.

... the Lord is the avenger of all such ...

Be forewarned:

... fornicators and adulterers God will judge. (Hebrews 13:4)

For God did not call us to uncleanness, but in holiness. Therefore he who rejects this does not reject man, but God, who has also given us His Holy Spirit. (1 Thessalonians 4:7-8)

What's God's will for your life? It is not uncleanness. Jesus didn't go to the cross so you could continue to live a life of debauchery. You were called in holiness. You were called to holiness. You are called to live a life that brings honor and glory to Jesus.

The standard Jesus left for us is high. In fact, it is impossibly high. Here's what Jesus has to say on the subject.

"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY.' But I say to you that whoever looks at a woman to

*lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart.
(Matthew 5:27-28)*

Have you ever harbored a lustful thought? Even the most fleeting, mental “hubba hubba” directed to a member of the opposite sex qualifies as adultery according to God’s standard. Women, you’re not exempt from this. Has your mind ever wondered “What would it be like to be with ...”?

This is certainly convicting to me. How about you? He who has an ear, let him hear!

Thankfully, Jesus has already paid the penalty for those sins of the mind. As a matter of fact, He has also paid the penalty for all your overt sexual sins, so right now, lay them down at the foot of the cross.

If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:9)

God’s mercies are new every morning! If you have stumbled in this, confess it to the Lord.

He will forgive you, and Jesus even goes beyond forgiveness. Jesus cleanses us from our unrighteousness and then empowers us to live lives pleasing to God. He has given us the gift of the Holy Spirit. God Himself indwells us to empower a sanctified life. All we have to do is yield.

In John, Chapter 8, we read an account of a woman who was caught in the very act of adultery. The scribes and Pharisees brought her to Jesus in order to test Him. They were hypocrites. This wasn’t about conforming to the Mosaic Law at all. If they had actually been zealous for the Law, they would have brought the guy too. It takes two, you know. The Law prescribed death by stoning for both partners.

So when they continued asking Him, He raised Himself up and said to them, "He who is without sin among you, let him throw a stone at her first." (John 8:7)

You probably know the story ... they were all convicted by this saying and left one-by-one.

When Jesus had raised Himself up and saw no one but the woman, He said to her, "Woman, where are those accusers of yours? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, Lord." And Jesus said to her, "Neither do I condemn you; go and sin no more." (John 8:10-11)

By the grace of Jesus Christ, the woman was forgiven. And by Jesus, the woman was empowered to go and sin no more.

If you have trusted Jesus Christ for salvation, you have been empowered by the Holy Spirit to live a life that pleases God. God’s will is that you live a sanctified life. God’s will is that your life would testify to the transforming power of Jesus Christ. And while we all stumble from time to time, our goal must be to be faithful to that calling.

When you fail, when you fall, just confess your sin, ask for forgiveness, dust yourself off and continue striving for obedience. Oh, there will likely be consequences for your sinful behavior. That’s not really a bad thing.

If you endure chastening, God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom a father does not chasten? (Hebrews 12:7)

To be chastened by God is not a bad thing at all because it shows He is working in you. God the Holy Spirit is working to conform you to the perfect image of Jesus Christ.

Cooperate with that work. Possess your own vessel in sanctification and honor. Go and sin no more.