

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

717 North Stapley Drive, Mesa, AZ 85203 Phone: (480) 833-7500

Series:	Special Messages	Pastor/Teacher
Text:	Romans 12:1-3; Hebrews 4:6-9	Gary L. W. Johnson
Date:	August 22, 2021 (a.m.)	

APOSTOLIC IMPERATIVE (Part 6)

“Our walk,” said John R. W. Stott, “depends on our mind, our conduct and on our outlook. As a man *thinketh in his heart* (or mind) *so is he* (Prov. 23:6, AV) and so he behaves. It is our thoughts, ultimately, which govern our behavior . . . It is a question of our preoccupation, the ambitions which compel us and interests which engross us; how we spend our time, money and energy: what we give ourselves up to. This is what we set our minds on.”¹ Failure to do so will result in the sin of forgetfulness of God’s character and acts. It was the fear of this that prompted the Psalmist to pray, “Give me understanding, and I shall live” (Psalm 119:144). Five times between verses 144 and 159 the theme of life is accented. The Hebrew word translated life is *chayah*. It means not merely staying alive, but enjoying a rich and meaningful life, one that is strong and full of vitality.² This thought is echoed in the words of Jesus: “I have come that they might have life and have it to the full” (John 10:10). What is the link between this kind of life and understanding? “The understanding,” wrote Thomas Manton, “is the great wheel of the soul, and guide of the whole man.”³ It is true that the rest of our faculties follow the dictates and decisions of the understanding. The quality of our life is dependent then on how we think. How do we naturally think?⁴ The Bible describes the *natural* condition of the human mind with terms like: *foolish* (Titus 3:3); *ignorant* (1 Peter 1:14); *futile* (Eph. 4:17); *depraved* (Romans 1:28); and likened to *darkness*⁵ (Acts 26:18; Romans 1:21; Eph. 4:18; Col. 1:13). This language is used to describe how men think in reference to the true God and spiritual realities. It is not simply a question of intelligence, for we recognize that fallen man can use his mind to accomplish a great many things. John Owen observed: “Be men otherwise and in other things never so wise, knowing, learned, and skillful, in spiritual things they are dark, blind, ignorant, unless they are renewed in the spirit of their minds by the Holy Spirit.”⁶ Psalm 10:4 says of the wicked, “in all his thoughts there is not room for God.” Who are these wicked people? The wicked are unbelievers, which is what we all once were. Wickedness is indeed a harsh word. We tend to think that word is reserved for a special class of people, like Hitler or Stalin. If that is the way you think, then perhaps you have never considered how great is the weight of sin.⁷ John Howe captured the essence of the matter when he wrote, “a wicked man’s life is nothing else by a continual forsaking of God, of departing from Him.”⁸ Having been rescued from the dominion of darkness and brought into the kingdom of Christ (Col. 1:13; 1 Peter 2:9; Eph. 5:8), we are called upon to be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Rom. 12:2; Eph. 4:23). Hendriksen points out that, “. . . the apostle describes the glorious result of this continuous transformation: *so that you may prove what is the will of God*. . . This is a very significant statement. It shows that in order to discern the will of God for their lives believers cannot just depend on their conscience. Conscience is indeed very important, but it must constantly be sent back to the school of Scripture to receive instruction from the Holy Spirit. It is in this manner that believers become and remain aware of God’s will. Which will? Decretive or Preceptive? The

latter, of course. See Deut. 29:29. In this way the will of God will become an increasingly well-established or proven component of the consciousness and lives of God's children. The more they live in accordance with that will and approve of it, the more also, through this experience, will they learn to know that will, and rejoice in that knowledge. They will exclaim, *Thy will is our delight*. And what is the contents of that preceptive will? In other words, what is it that God wants us to be and to do? The answer is: *that which is good and well-pleasing and perfect.*"⁹ We noted last week the way the expression "will of God" is used in the Bible.

1. God's *sovereign* or decretive will = God's secret plan that determines everything that happens in the universe (Daniel 4:35; Proverbs 16:33; 21:1; Revelation 4:11; Ephesians 1:11; Romans 9:19; 11:33-36; Acts 2:23-4:27-28). Because God's sovereign will is secret, it does not directly affect our decision making.
2. God's *moral* or perceptive will = God's revealed commands in the Bible that teach how men ought to believe and live (Romans 2:18; 1 Thessalonians 4:3; 5:18; 2 Corinthians 6:14; plus all other direct commands in Scripture). Where God has spoken in the Bible, the believer must obey. But God's moral will does not directly address many specific decisions faced by an individual.

In many Evangelical circles; however, an additional understanding of God's will is taught:

3. God's *individual* will = God's ideal, detailed life-plan uniquely designed for each person (Colossians 1:9; 4:12; Romans 12:2; Ephesians 5:17; 6:6; Proverbs 3:5-6; 16:9; Psalm 32:8; Genesis 24). God's guidance for decision making is given through the indwelling Holy Spirit who progressively reveals God's life-plan to the heart of the believer through a variety of means. *This is the aspect of God's will that is usually of greatest concern to those facing life's decisions.*

Two very popular books emphasize this: *Experiencing God: How to Live the Full Adventure of Knowing and Doing the Will of God*, by Henry Blackaby and Claude King; and *Finding The Will of God In a Crazy, Mixed-Up World*, by the late Tim LaHaye. When I was a student back in the mid-1970s at Christian Heritage College (now San Diego Christian College), LaHaye (who was the school's president) spoke frequently on this subject in Chapel. He held an unusual view on Romans 12:2, even from the traditional viewpoint. The final phrase of Romans 12:2 reads, "that you may prove what is that *good and acceptable and perfect will of God*," (NKJV). He says, "Most Bible teachers accept the three words . . . as modifiers of one will of God. By contrast, I view them as *three levels* of that one will." The terms "good" and "acceptable" describe "God's will for the people who fall into sin but then repent and still desire to do God's basic will" (p. 59). This corresponds to the idea of God's "second best" held by other proponents of the traditional view. LaHaye gives it great emphasis and even includes nine charts to show how specific individuals related to the three levels of God's will. By falling into sin, you can forfeit God's "perfect" will forever, so you have to settle for only His "acceptable" will. If you stay in sin too long, then only God's "good" will is left for you. "Don't misunderstand," he pleads, "God's good will is a worthy option for the Christian who has rebelled against the Lord and has made many major decisions during that rebellious time" (p. 66). When most traditional proponents try to avoid or downplay this "second best" category of the individual will, LaHaye makes it a centerpiece of his presentation. One of his signposts to finding God's perfect will is inward peace. "Inner peace is God's supernatural sign that decides *safe* or *out* as we attempt to discern His will" (p. 107). "It's wise never

to make major decisions unless the umpire, the Holy Spirit-inspired peace of God that surpasses all understanding, calls the decision *safe!*” (p. 108). In practice he is more shrewd than his principle, for he realizes that often lack of peace is the result of immature anxiety, not supernatural guidance. The “melancholic” in particular needs encouragement to move forward because he rarely feels peace. “His lack of peace was more a function of his melancholy temperament than a sign from God not to marry” (p. 162).¹⁰ As a popular rock band once sang, is “I have a peaceful easy feeling” really an indication that we are doing the will of God?

- I. **THE GOD OF PEACE.** Isa. 57:15-21 tells us that it is God who creates and establishes peace. To give a vivid expression to this quality, the Lord is first described in His divine majesty. He is “the high and lofty One.” As is His throne, so is He (6:11). He lives forever and is not subject to the twists and turns of earthly life. He is called “holy,” a word in which both His superiority above the creature and His being separate from sin are expressed (cf. 6:3). This majestic God now makes a statement in which He sums up all the riches of the grace bestowed on the godly. Again, He first emphasizes His divine superiority; He lives “in a high and holy place,” infinitely exalted above human beings (cf. 6:1; 18:4; 33:5) and unapproachable to sinners (cf. 6:3, 5). Then follows the gracious word that He also lives “with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit.” As is evident from the word “revive” of which the next line speaks, both words refer to a life that is faint, nearly extinct, broken (cf. v. 16; 42:3), especially inwardly, for the revival is promised to the “heart” and to the “spirit.” This state of mind is to be understood as a consequence of the anguish and distress into which the people have been thrust by God’s afflicting hand, but even more as a description of their being broken in strength in a purely natural sense. For these people are the same persons as they who made the Lord their refuge (v. 13b); hence the implication of these words is that, in contrast to the “wicked” referred to in verse 20, they have allowed themselves to be humbled under the heavy hand of God. That the high God lives with such people (cf. Ps. 138:6) is to them a miracle of condescension. On the other hand, a high God and a lowly people go together well because only a lowly people acknowledge His highness. The result of this indwelling is that it revives the spirit and heart of the lowly and contrite; it serves to comfort and strengthen those who pine away in anxiety and self-accusation and restores to them the experience of joy.¹¹
- II. **THE PEACE OF GOD.** “My sheep know my voice” (John 10:4). Christ’s faithful lambs know his voice because they are used to the sound of it. Because they commune with him often and hunger for the words that fall from his lips, they recognize the tone and rhythm of his precious words. They can tell at once whether he or a stranger is declaring peace. They know his voice because it speaks good to their souls. His word of peace humbles souls, cleanses from guilt, transforms lives, melts their hearts, and endears Christ to them. When you hear Christ speaking peace to your soul, you can rest in his comfort. But your flesh will grow sickly and pale, drained of its power by a renewed taste of God’s mercy in Christ’s blood. The God of peace equips His people to do His revealed will (Heb. 13:20, 21).

CONCLUSION: I close with these words of Owen: “When men do truly *look upon Christ whom they have pierced*, without which there is no healing or peace, they will *mourn*, Zech. 12:10; they will mourn for him, even upon this account, and detest the sin that pierced him. When we go to Christ for healing, faith eyes him peculiarly as one pierced. Faith takes several views of Christ, according to the occasions of address to him and communion with him that it hath. Sometimes it views his holiness, sometimes

his power, sometimes his love, (sometimes) his favour with his Father. And for *with his stripes we are healed, and the chastisement of our peace was upon him* (Isa. 53:5). When we look for healing, his stripes are to be eyes – not in the outward story of them, which is the course of popish devotionists, but in the love, kindness, mystery, and design of the cross; and when we look for peace, his chastisements must be in our eye. Now this, I say, if it be done according to the mind of God, and in the strength of that Spirit which is poured out on believers, it will beget a detestation of that sin or sins for which healing and peace is sought.”¹² This is also the key to knowing and doing the will of God. This is how we lay aside the sin that so easily clings to us and run the race with endurance, looking unto Jesus (Heb. 12:1-2).

ENDNOTES

¹ J. R. W. Stott, *Men Made New: An Exposition of Romans 5-8* (Baker, 1984), p. 86.

² *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* IV, G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren, eds. (Eerdmans, 1980), p. 334.

³ *The Complete Works of Thomas Manton* III (rpt. Maranatha, N.D.).

⁴ “The thoughts do most distinguish men’s hearts, because they are the freest acts of the mind, wherein the mind is most itself,” *Work of Thomas Goodwin* VI (rpt. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1979), p. 476. C. H. Spurgeon warns, “Where there is much traffic of bad thinking, there will be much mire and dirt; every wave of wicked thought adds something to the corruption which rots upon the shore of life. It is dreadful to think that a vile imagination, once indulged, gets the keys of our minds, and can get in again very easily whether we will or no, and can so return as to bring seven other spirits with it more wicked than itself; and what may follow, no one knows.” *John Ploughman’s Talks* (rpt. Baker, 1979), p. 52.

⁵ “Spiritual darkness is spoken of in Scripture, not as a mere passive or negative thing, but as a *positive power*.” James Buchanan, *The Office and Work of the Holy Spirit* (rpt. The Banner of Truth Trust, 1966), p. 56.

⁶ *The Works of John Owen* III (rpt. The Banner of Truth Trust, 1972), p. 244.

⁷ This is actually the response Anselm gave to the question: “Why could God not simply wipe out man’s sin without requiring atonement?” His actual words were *nondum considerasti quanti ponderis sit peccatum. Cur Deus Homo* (Why God Became Man), Book 1, Chapter 21.

⁸ *The Works of the Reverend John Howe* I (rpt. Soli Deo Gloria, 1990), p. 422.

⁹ Wm. Hendriksen, *Romans: New Testament Commentary* (Baker, 1983), p. 406.

¹⁰ For an extended critique of these two books and others, cf. *Decision Making and The Will of God* by Garry Friesen (Multnomah, 1980 25th anniv. Edition), pp. 427-468. This is the best and most comprehensive book on the subject.

¹¹ cf. J. Ridderbos, *Bible Student’s Commentary: Isaiah* (Zondervan, 1985), p. 520.

¹² John Owen, “On Indwelling Sin in Believers” in his *Works* VI (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1974), p. 308.