

## **DOING THE WILL OF GOD:**

### **COMFORT TO THE FAINT-HEARTED**

No one can attentively read the apostolic writings without being struck with the frequency and the prominence of “*the will of God.*” Jesus refers to it often in his discourses, and says plainly that the doing of this will is the rule by which his friends will finally be selected. So distinctly was it before his mind, that those only who did the will of his Father would finally be chosen for companionship with him in glory—that when one, upon a certain occasion, exclaimed concerning the blessedness of the mother of Jesus, he said,

*“Yea, rather blessed are they that **hear the word of God and do it.**”*

What is meant by the will of God no one need be at a loss to know. There is no simpler idea in the whole range of Scripture. A child may grasp it. The will of God is that which He wishes us to be and to do. The smallest capacity can take this in. In fact, the terms of salvation are altogether such as any ordinary mind can understand. The difficulty is not in knowing: it lies in another direction. The difficulty doubtless lies here, in remembering constantly ALL that God would have us do and to be, and so remembering as to conform. There are various elements and ingredients in the will of God. There is a great variety of things that He would have us to do and to be. We take them one by one as they present themselves in the reading of the word.

This morning, in our reading of the prophet Isaiah, (chapter 58,) we have one of them brought before us with a special prominence, demanding our most earnest attention. So important is it that Paul declares that without this element of mental furnishing, all our best attainments will go for nothing at the last. The Scripture in question was addressed to Israel after the flesh, but is none the less applicable to us who are commanded to be “*mindful of the words which were spoken before by the holy prophets*” as well as of “*the commandments of the apostles*” (2 Pet. 3:2). It is prefaced by a form of reproof that furnishes an effective background to the matter to be exhibited—a very wholesome, and sobering, and even needed lesson for us. Isaiah is told to cry aloud and not to spare:

*“Show my people their transgression, and the house of Jacob their sins.”*

What was it that Isaiah was to bring in charge against them? Was it that they entirely turned away from God, and took no interest in the ordinances of the sanctuary? On the contrary, Yahweh says,

*“They seek me daily, and delight to know my ways . . . they ask of me the ordinances of justice; they take delight in approaching to God. Wherefore have we fasted, say they, and thou seest not? wherefore have we afflicted our soul, and thou takest no knowledge?”*

Here is a very religious nation—a nation interested in the temple and the affairs of the Mosaic service—whose complaint is that God does not take notice of them equal to their zeal in serving Him. Why, to such a nation, should Isaiah be directed to lift up his warning voice as a trumpet? What was the matter with them? Wherein lay the defect that alienated God’s regard from all their ceremonial compliances with His will? We presently discover. They were lacking in pitiful hearts and in deeds of mercy. They conformed to the outward requirements of the divine service, but failed in those qualities and motives which were the kernel of the whole law of God. They fasted, but—

*“In the days of your fast, . . . **ye exact all your labours.**”*

They exacted service from menials, instead of remitting it: their servants, their dependants, their inferiors were not allowed to participate in the rest and release of the day, but were kept to their toil and their drudgery.

*“Ye fast for strife and debate”:*

They left off their usual occupations only to make the fast a day of vainglorious argument, instead of a day of contemplation and humility, and kindly solicitude for neighbours. They duly observed the

ceremonial parts of the fast—sitting morosely at stated hours in the garb and attitude of mourners, “*appearing unto men to fast*,” but not fasting in the way acceptable with God. God found no pleasure in their lugubrious penances.

*“Is it such a fast that I have chosen?” enquires He, “a day for a man to afflict his soul? is it to bow down his head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? wilt thou call this a fast, and an acceptable day to the Lord? Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh?”*

Here we have shown to us plainly enough one aspect of character that God desires to see in His children. It was one of the grounds of His rejection of Israel after the flesh, that they were lacking in the spirit of ready benevolence, finding expression in abundant deeds of kindness. It will be a reason found not lacking in the case of those sent away from the judgment seat, with weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth. The apostles speak pointedly on the subject. John asks,

*“Whoso hath this world’s good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him?”* (1 John 3:17).

Jesus often enjoined the same thing, adding that with what measure of kindness we acted towards men, we ourselves would be measured in the day of recompense. It is a matter to be kept most constantly in view. It is a matter we are in danger of forgetting or neglecting. We are most liable to do this through the power of a lost truth which we have been permitted to lay hold of again. We have come to see that the public habit of contributing openly to purposes and institutions of philanthropy is inconsistent with the injunction of Christ to do our almsgiving secretly; and we have come to see that the common notion that men will be saved by good deeds in this direction is an unscriptural and an untrue notion. We have come to see that men can only be saved by the belief and obedience of the gospel, and that no amount of almsgiving will avail for those who are outside the covenant-reconciliation with God in Christ. But we must not allow the recognition of this truth to dim our perception of the other. We must not go to the philanthropist and say, “Ah! you expect to be saved by your annual subscriptions, whereas we look for salvation in the Abrahamic covenant ratified by the blood of Christ only.” The philanthropist is undoubtedly mistaken in hoping to make peace with God through his alms-giving; but we shall be mistaken, too, in hoping to find acceptance with Christ through faith alone. Faith without works is dead. We must “*do the will*” of the Father, as well as believe His word. His will is that we be like Him in character. Christ plainly says,

*“Be like unto your Father.”*

It is a very high standard, but it is the standard judicially applied by and by, and it will not help us to shut our eyes. The result will be beautiful when the process is concluded. When a great company of men and women, having the character of God, are separated from the gross elements with which they are necessarily surrounded in the day of their preparation—when they are incorporated together as one society, having immortality of nature as its basis, and the world put into their hands, it will be a day of gladness for them, and a day of blessing for the world.

But you feel depressed and say there is no hope in such a rule of salvation. Slowly, friend, slowly. Why so despondent? Well, you say, it is no use pretending to be perfect. “If I am to be perfect before I can be saved, then I cannot be saved; that is all I have to say.” My good friend, let us look the thing fairly in the face and all round; do not go off with a half-impression on the subject. You do not deny that these are the commandments? “No,” you say with a groan, “I admit these are the commandments, and I read, ‘*Blessed are those that do his commandments.*’ I try to do them honestly and faithfully; but I know I make a sorry business of it; and I say again, if my acceptance is to depend upon my perfect success, then I cannot hope to be accepted.” My good friend and brother, you truly read our duty to the commandments, and the blessedness coming out of their observance; God forbid

that I should seek to lessen the keenness of your perceptions in this direction. But are you unwilling to open your mind to all the qualifications with which that truth is associated? You say, "I hope not." Very well, have you never heard of forgiveness? You say, "Ah! that is for sinners of the Gentiles." But is there no forgiveness for Christ's brethren? Did not Christ teach his disciples to pray—

*"Forgive us our trespasses"?*

Has not John the Apostle written,

*"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness"?*

Does not James say, in such a case of confession,

*"If he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him"?*

Has not David written,

*"As the heaven is high above the earth, so great is his mercy towards them that fear him. As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us. Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear him"?*

"Then I do not understand," says our faint-hearted brother, who refuses to take comfort. "If forgiveness is so easily and so bountifully available, it leaves no force in the declarations that require the doing of the will of God as the condition of our acceptance." Well, it is one of those apparent paradoxes that present no practical difficulty in the right placing of the elements of wisdom. The right answer brings a wholesome lesson, not a little needed in these days when we are in danger of being drawn aside from a divine course of life in two distinct ways. We are in danger, first, from the bias inherited with our early theological teaching. This told us, as it tells millions daily from all the so-called evangelical pulpits in the land, that we have nothing to do in order to be saved: that the work of our salvation has been done—done "long, long ago"—that we have only to believe; that we have only to allow Christ to save us; and that if we think our deeds can in any way contribute to our salvation, we are the victims of a heresy which prevents our salvation more than almost any course of sin. Nothing tends more to sink the mental man in spiritual sloth and stupefaction than this misapplication of a New Testament truth. If it is true that we have not to "*work out our own salvation*"; that we have not to overcome; that we shall not receive according to our works; and if it is not true that the righteous scarcely be saved, and that God is not mocked, and that whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap; if the truth is that we have only to believe that Christ's excellence and righteousness will stand to our account, and to repudiate all possibility of performing any acceptable service towards God, then the mind will surrender to native indolence and sin. But the truth lies in another direction. Jesus tells us that except our righteousness exceed the Pharisaic measure, we cannot inherit the kingdom of God; and John, warning us against deception on the point, says,

*"Be not deceived: **he that doeth righteousness is righteous.**"*

Paul tells us plainly that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom: and Peter, that only if we do the things commanded, will an entrance be abundantly ministered unto us into the everlasting kingdom.

The New Testament truth, which is evangelically misapplied, you understand very well. It is true that as regards its initial stage, salvation is "*not of works*"; and that if Christ had not abolished death, and laid the foundation of our redemption in his death and resurrection, man's case was helpless and hopeless. But Christ having laid a foundation for man to build upon, he is no longer helpless and hopeless. He is commanded to rise and work. Christ is now—

*"The author of eternal salvation **unto all them that OBEY him**" (Heb. 5:9).*

Those who trust entirely to what Christ has done, as "evangelical" gospel preaching tells men to do, will find their trust misplaced at last. Christ having done his part, they must do theirs; and their wisdom is to find out what that part is, and to do it.

The other danger to which we are exposed lies in a somewhat different direction. There is a danger of resting too much on that very doctrine of forgiveness of which the disconsolate have to be reminded. A man may say, "I have discarded the evangelical misconception: I recognise that our standing with Christ at the last will be determined by the question of our performance or non-performance of the divine will." Yet at the same time, he may live as if he still held on to the mistaken idea of common theology, that we have to "do nothing, only believe." He may live in habitual violation of the divine will, and comfort himself with the persuasion that his habitual disobedience will be covered by that privilege of forgiveness which comes with the priesthood of Christ to all his accepted brethren. It is possible to make a great mistake here. The privilege of forgiveness is itself conditional. We do not require to go far to see this. The very petition for forgiveness which Christ puts into the mouth of his disciples, in what is called "The Lord's Prayer," is linked with what is in reality a condition, though it sounds like an argument:

*"Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive them that trespass against us."*

Christ places the conditional nature of forgiveness beyond all question in his accompanying comment to this effect:

*"If ye forgive not men their trespasses, NEITHER will your Father forgive your trespasses"* (Matt. 6:15).

The conditional nature of forgiveness is manifest on broader grounds.

*"If any man sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous."*

So John testifies, but he limits the efficacy of this advocate's functions in saying,

*"IF we walk in the light, the blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth us from all sin."*

Plainly expressed it comes to this: the Father will forgive those for whom Christ prays, but Christ will only pray for those who are earnestly striving to walk in the light.

*"I pray not for the world,"* he said.

Of his disciples he said,

*"I pray for them (the men Thou hast given me out of the world)."*

We see his patience with them in the Garden of Gethsemane and on other occasions. He made apologies for them, saying,

*"The spirit truly is willing, but the flesh is weak."*

For Peter, in the hour of direst weakness, he specially exhibited mercy and compassion saying beforehand,

*"I have prayed for thee . . . when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren."*

But let us remember who the disciples were for whom Christ thus prayed. They were not heedless, or indifferent, or disobedient men. Though not enlightened on all points while Christ was yet with them in the flesh, they were in the main earnestly set on the doing of the will of God. This is shown by their response to John's baptism, before Christ chose them. It is placed beyond all doubt by Christ's public recognition of them in this character, on the occasion of his mother and his relatives seeking him. "Who are my mother and my brethren?" said he, and stretching his hands towards his disciples, he said,

*"BEHOLD MY MOTHER AND MY BRETHREN! For whosoever shall do the will of my Father who is in heaven, the same is my brother, and sister, and mother."*

Consequently, when we think of Christ's readiness to intercede for his disciples, we must remember that his disciples were not men who could truthfully say of themselves what the sinners of this English nation are made to say every Sunday: "We have done those things which we ought not to have done, and we left undone those things which we ought to have done, and there is no health in us." On the contrary, they were men earnestly in love with Christ, and earnestly striving to observe

the commandments delivered to them—failing sometimes in their endeavours, doubtless, but earnestly striving to be merciful, and forgiving, and just, and kind—earnestly devoted to the fear of God and the honour of Christ. This must be our case in the main, before we can hope for that forgiveness which will cover our sins and blot out all, our failings, shortcomings, and offences. When Paul informs us that Christ is high priest over his own house, he is careful to add, “*whose house are we, if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end,*” and he instantly appends this exhortation:

*“Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God. But exhort one another daily, while it is called Today: lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. For we are made partakers of Christ, if we hold the beginning of our confidence stedfast unto the end.”*

We see the position, then, brethren: that Christ’s mediation will not be available for those who go on sinning, but only for those who walk in the fear of the lord all the day long, striving against sin. For such, even if disconsolate, like our not altogether imaginary brother, it will greatly avail in the great day of settlement when the High Priest (then our Judge) may rebuke their faintheartedness, saying,

*“O ye of little faith, wherefore did ye doubt?”*

In that day of glorious cleansing, delivered from the encumbrance of this sinful nature, and made to stand pure and white in the glory of incorruptibility and spirit-power, they will joyfully join in the joyful ascription of John the beloved disciple:

*“Unto him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father: to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever.”*

It practically matters little whether we live to see the dawn of this glorious day or no. There is a natural desire to be among those who shall not taste of death, a desire stimulated to the highest pitch in the presence of the accumulating signs of the nearness of the day of the Lord; but it matters little “*whether we wake or sleep.*” We can but fill the length of our probation in either case. If we die, we lose nothing if our course is pleasing to Christ; if we live to the lord’s coming, we gain nothing if he accept us not. It must be manifest that the whole importance lies in the practical conformity of our daily lives to his will—a conformity relating to many common matters, as men reckon, but which are very important matters when we reflect that on the matter of daily living the judgment will be based which determines our final lot. It is best to think of ourselves as on a level in this respect with the brethren of the apostolic age. They had none of the signs of the Lord’s coming before their eyes, yet were they exhorted to be sober and vigilant, and watchful, and earnest to the point of always abounding in the work of the Lord. If we are different from them as to the time in which we live, if we see the tokens all abroad in the earth, of which they knew nothing, pointing to the arrival of the time for the Lord’s return, we have only all the greater reason earnestly to addict ourselves to apostolic rules of life, and to remember and obey all the commandments which the Lord has given for the guidance of his house in his absence.

The memory of the commandments is certainly one of the most vital functions of the new man, and whatever helps this helps us on the road of eternal life. God grant the help of His countenance in all our endeavours to prepare for the coming of the Son of Man.

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By Bro. Robert Roberts