

Doing the Will of God!

Psalm 25:1-10, Matthew 21:18-32

September 24, 2000

“Which of the two did the will of his father?” This is one of the few important questions in life. “Which of the two did the will of his father?” The answer is obvious but maddening, so they killed him four days later. This parable is not just about a father and two sons. It is not even just about the chief priests and the elders in contrast with the tax collectors and the harlots. This parable is about us, the minister and the elders and the deacons, as well as the members, the children, and the friends, of Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church. This parable is about us, because by it Jesus is asking us, “Are you doing the will of your father?” “Are you doing the will of God?” “Are you obeying the one who made you, redeemed you for himself, and calls you into his service?” “Are you?”

Before we can do or not do the will of the father, there has to be an expression to us of the will of the father, a command, an instruction, an order, a calling, something to obey or not obey. That is the only way the question makes sense. So, before we can answer whether we are doing the will of God, we need to determine what that will is. Within the parable in today’s reading, that will appears to be a call to service: “Son, go and work in the vineyard today.” We are aware that a great deal of the Christian life is made up of serving God by serving human need in the vineyard of his world. But given the context of the parable in today’s reading, given its application in reprimand to the chief priests and the elders, it is clear that there is a doing of the will of God that takes priority over human service, there is an obeying that precedes a life of obedience, and there is a calling that comes before the call to serve. The first call is the call to faith, the call to repentance, the call to believe in God and in his Christ. “Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you. For John came to you in the way of righteousness, and you did not *believe* him, but the tax collectors and the harlots *believed* him; and even when you saw it, you did not afterward repent and *believe* him.” This is the primary doing of the will of God: not doing good works, but believing in the good work God has done for us, turning away from our own supposed goodness, turning toward the cross, and trusting in Jesus Christ. “Are you doing the will of your father?” “Are you?”

The good and gracious will of God, despite our rebelliousness, stubbornness, and recalcitrance, is to do for us what we cannot do for ourselves, to call us home to himself, to take away our love of sinning, to break the stranglehold we have on ourselves, and to win our hearts back to himself. Is this of interest to you? Are you ready to believe? Are you ready to give up on self-promotion and to trust in the goodness of God alone? “Are you doing the will of your father?”

Today’s reading deals in the contrast between saying “Yes” and actually doing the will of the Father. The very possibility of our either saying or doing “Yes” to God depends entirely upon God’s prior actions towards us. The good news is that God both says “Yes” to us and does “Yes” to us. Apart from this, we could do nothing.

How does God say “Yes” to us? God says “Yes” to us by calling us. God calls us not only to be with God in heaven, and not only to be God’s people, but specifically to believe, to obey, and, yes, to serve.

Before the foundation of the world, God called us by name to be God's own. God also gives us particular gifts and talents and so calls us to particular service in the world and in his kingdom. This is part of how God says "Yes" to us. There are few things we could do that would be more important than seeking the will and call of God for our lives.

But there is more: God not only says "Yes," but God also does "Yes" to us. God not only speaks, but also takes action. God not only calls us to be God's own, but also, in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ provides for us to be God's own. With the cross and resurrection, God backs up words with action. With the obedient sacrifice unto death and with the recreation of new life, God does what God says. So, we are not only called God's own, but also we are made God's own.

We know that we cannot lift ourselves, or our hearts, minds, or souls high enough to get to God. But in Jesus Christ, God captures our hearts, souls, minds, and selves, and lifts us high to God's own self. So we are grateful for these words and actions of God make up the foundation for our saying "Yes" and doing "Yes" to God. God already says "Yes" and does "Yes" to us. God provides for us to be his own people, and he calls us to particular life work and service.

The effect of this prior work of God is this: no matter how unrighteous we have been, God gives us an open invitation to turn and to come back! No matter how poorly we have been looked upon by the rest of the world, God looks upon us with favor and compassion. Even if we think we are among the worst of the worst, there is a good place for us in the will of God.

There is an open invitation here to live in relationship to God. The most blatant and obvious sinners may accept it most easily. Those whose sins are subtle and socially acceptable may stand at greatest risk of failing to realize they need an invitation, much less taking appropriate action to accept it. Today's readings are about saying "Yes" and doing "Yes," first on the part of God, but then by us.

It is one thing to say "Yes" to God. But it is another thing to do "Yes" to God, to obey, to do the will of God. Maybe we have been saying and doing "No" to God, running away as hard as we can. But we cannot outrun God! No matter how far you have fallen, no matter how far you have run, God still calls you his own child. God still has a special place for us, God still wants us to believe and obey.

Maybe we have been saying "Yes" but doing "No" to God. That is a dangerous position to be in. That is what the warning is all about. The power of self-deception is tremendous. If it is our own goodness, strength, morality, intelligence, and generosity that convince us of our righteousness, we know nothing about the righteousness of God.

In today's reading, the Father sent his two sons to the vineyard to work. One said, "No," but went and did it anyway. The other said, "Yes," but did not go. The first fulfilled his calling. The second disobeyed.

God calls each and everyone of us. God has a plan and a purpose and a reason for our lives. If we ignore that, we will be frustrated, empty, and worthless, no matter how successful it might appear outwardly. But if we listen and obey God's call, if we do what we are meant to do with our lives, life will be full of meaning and grace, even if outwardly we are persecuted and crucified.

Given the foundation of God's saying "Yes" and doing "Yes" to us, how can we say "Yes" and do "Yes" to God?

The parable about the two sons does not congratulate the first for not saying "Yes" but for doing "Yes" even though he said "No." The doing "Yes" is most important, but the saying "Yes"

is good, too, if it goes along with the doing. While the parable encourages obedience, it does not encourage us to say “No” to God! So, how can we say “Yes” to God? One way literally is by singing hymns of praise and adoration! The Bible clearly tells us to sing. The majesty of God the glory of God’s deeds, and the sacrifice and new life of Christ will give us reason to sing. When we gather here and stand before God, we can do no other than to sing our hearts out.

A second way of saying “Yes” is by our prayers, prayers of confession, thanksgiving, and intercession. By praying all these things to God Almighty, we are saying, “Yes, you are God, and you alone are God. We are not God, and we can no longer pretend to be God.” This is what we call repenting, changing our mind, turning around, turning away from sin, turning toward God.

A third way of saying “Yes” is by our affirmation of faith. We normally use the Apostles’ Creed. In its very earliest and most ancient form, it had a question and answer arrangement that is still echoed today. When people wanted to profess their faith, they were questioned: “Do you believe in God?” And they would answer: “Yes, I believe in God the Father Almighty maker of heaven and earth.” “Do you believe in Jesus Christ?” “Yes, I believe in Jesus Christ his only son our Lord.” “Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?” “Yes, I believe in the Holy Spirit.” So this is not only a summary of the faith, but a way of saying “Yes” to God.

A fourth way of saying “Yes” to God is by answering the questions we ask for a profession or reaffirmation of faith. “Do you admit that you are a sinner and stand in the need of God’s grace and mercy?” “Do you believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior?” “Do you promise to follow Christ as a faithful member of this church?” It is a time not only for the direct participants to answer, but for all of us to answer and to rededicate ourselves to God.

These are four ways of saying “Yes” to God. Of course, the question raised by today’s reading is whether we stop there. Do we only say “Yes”, but actually do “No,” actually disobey God’s will? That is what Jesus’ parable about the two sons says is wrong with the chief priests and the elders. We are not told not to say “Yes” to God; we are told that what we do overrides what we say. And again, we have no interest in accusing the chief priests and the elders. The only reason this story is remembered and preserved is that it poses a question aimed directly at the church in every generation: Do we make a show of saying “Yes” to God while we actually fail to do “Yes” to God? The reason the question is asked is to encourage us to repent and to obey! If we do not change, tax collectors and harlots will go to the Kingdom of God ahead of us.

So, what are some ways that we can do and live our “Yes” to God? We have already talked about repenting and believing. That is the basic doing of the will of God being urged upon us here. Given that, how do we live out our repenting and believing? First, there is faithfulness in worship. The worship of God is what we were created for; it is the purpose of human life. The Biblical visions of heaven are of continual and eternal worship. What could be more important than faithfulness in worship, being here week after week singing, praying, submitting ourselves to the word of God? If we believe that God speaks to us in the word of God, we need to be here where it is read and preached.

A second way to do “Yes” is eagerness in learning. One character trait which John Calvin used to talk about and treasure in people was teachableness. Some people have an attitude of being teachable; some people you cannot tell anything! Part of doing the will of God involves an eagerness to learn the will of God through the word of God in worship in Sunday School and in other classes and opportunities.

A third way to do “Yes” to God, to be obedient, has to do with joy in giving. This is a radical idea! The only thing more voluntary than coming to church is putting money in the

offering plate. Think of the joy of giving, not as a burden, not grudgingly, not because we have to or need to, but the sheer joy, the excitement of acknowledging that all the world belongs to God, the freedom of expressing that only the God and Father of Jesus Christ is Lord over us and that money is not lord over us or over our lives. Remember—if our faith is only a matter of words and does not reach so far as to open our wallets and checkbooks, it has to questioned whether our hearts and souls have been converted.

A fourth way to do “Yes” to God is to seek to determine what God is calling us to do in this life, and then to do it. This applies not only to service to the church but to what our life work is.

Fifth, are we bringing people to God? Are we bringing people to Jesus Christ? Are we bringing people to the church of Jesus Christ? The benefits and joys of Christianity are not private. They are not meant to be kept to ourselves. The good news is for the world, and the church’s job is to share it.

No matter what we have said or done, the gospel of Jesus Christ gives us an open invitation to turn around and to come back to God. God has already said “Yes” to us by calling us his own and done “Yes” to us by providing for our salvation.

Do we hear the invitation? Do we change our hearts and minds? Do we believe? And do we say “Yes” to God by doing the will of God?

To God be the glory, forever and ever! Amen.

© Dr. James C. Goodloe IV, Pastor
Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
1627 Monument Avenue
Richmond, Virginia 23220
www.grace-covenant.org