

# Whoever Does the Will of God

Psalm 98:1-9, Matthew 12:38-50

“Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother.” Can you hear what he is saying? This climax to today’s reading echoes what Jesus has said before in this gospel. In chapter 7: “Not every one who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.” In chapter 10: “Every one who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven.” And in chapter 11: “All things have been delivered to me by my Father.” So all of this is gathered up and carried forward into today’s reading, telling us that God is the Father of Jesus Christ.

“Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother.” Can you hear what he is saying? This climax to today’s reading also anticipates much of what Jesus is yet to say in this gospel. In chapter 16: “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.” In chapter 18: “It is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.” And in chapter 25: “Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.” So this climax in today’s reading not only echoes previous teachings but also points ahead to teachings yet to be uttered, telling us that Jesus is the Son of God.

“Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother.” Do you hear these words of Christ? What does this say? What does this mean? And what does this have to do with us?

First of all, what this says is that God is the God and Father of Jesus Christ. The God who made us is the God and Father of Jesus Christ. The God who sustains us is the God and Father of Jesus Christ. The God to whom we belong is the God and Father of Jesus Christ. We do not worship an unknown God. We do not worship a distant God. We do not worship a generic God. We do not worship a little God designed just to serve us or meet our needs. We worship none other than the God and Father of Jesus Christ.

Two weeks ago, at a meeting of the Kiwanis Club of Richmond, I heard a candidate for the City Council of Richmond encourage his hearers to worship “their God of choice.” But I am here to tell you that a “God of choice” is no God at all, but merely an idol. We can choose idols. We can manufacture idols. And we can

manipulate idols. But we cannot choose God to be God; God has already chosen that, quite apart from us. We cannot manufacture God or fashion him to our pleasure; it is God who has made us. And we cannot manipulate God or force or trick him to do our will; for God's thoughts are not our thoughts, neither are our ways God's ways, for as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are God's ways higher than our ways and God's thoughts than our thoughts.

We do not choose God. Any God whom we could choose to be God would, by that very capacity, be exposed as less than and other than God, as an imposter and a pretender. It is profoundly disturbing to realize that someone who would seek to hold public office does not even realize that God is not merely an object of human choice or preference but is instead the source of our being, the sustainer of our existence, the goal of our lives, and the judge of all that we are and all that we do.

So, when Jesus Christ refers to "my Father in heaven," we learn again that God, who made us, to whom we belong, and whom we worship, is the God and Father of Jesus Christ. This is what it says.

Second, what this means is that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. Yes, this is taking the same information and running it the other direction. Not only is God none other than the God and Father of Jesus Christ, so that we are not worshiping some unknown or even unknowable God, but also Jesus Christ is the Son of God, so that in him God has drawn near to us, God has come to us, and God has become one of us. If God is Christ's Father, then Christ is God's Son. We owe him our allegiance, we owe him our faith, and we owe him our lives.

Do you want to know who God is? Look to Jesus Christ. Do you want to know what God is like? Look to Jesus Christ. Do you want to know what God does for us? Look to Jesus Christ. Do you want to know what God asks of us? Look to Jesus Christ.

We are not left alone here. We are not deserted. We are not orphaned or abandoned. We do not have to live in the darkness or the silence. Instead, the silence of the heavens has been broken, and the darkness has been scattered. God has spoken his word to us in Jesus Christ, and God has shined his light into our lives in Jesus Christ. If you do not know the terror of the darkness or the horror of the silence, this may not be of any interest to you. But when the terror strikes, and the darkness falls upon you, remember that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, know that God is good, and realize: "If God is for us, who is against us?" This is what it means that God is his Father and that he is God's Son.

Third, what this has to do with us is this: "Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother." Do you hear that? We are invited into the family. Jesus is not talking about his biological mother and brothers.

He uses the occasion of their coming and looking for him to point to something larger than nuclear family. He is not yet talking just about his uncommitted hearers, for although there are people around him, it seems that this is directed toward them as instruction. “‘Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?’ And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother.’”

From this we learn that the first part of being included in the family of the Son of God is being a disciple of Jesus Christ. A disciple is a student, a believer, and a follower. We could scarcely be disciples of Jesus Christ without knowing him and his words. We could not be disciples of Jesus Christ without believing in him and in his gospel. And we certainly would not be disciples of Jesus Christ without trying to obey his teachings and the example of his life. So we are called to be his disciples. It was when Peter first confessed his faith in Jesus as “the Christ, the Son of the living God,” that Jesus said to him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.” Now that his being the Christ has been revealed to us, we, too, are called to faith and discipleship.

In addition to being called to believe in Jesus Christ, we are also called to obey Jesus Christ. This is what we learn from the repeated language about doing the will of God. This is not a prerequisite for becoming Christian, for then none of us would ever qualify. But when we have become Christian, this is an expression of our faith and discipleship.

What, then, does it mean to do the will of God? If it meant to obey perfectly the Ten Commandments in the Old Testament or to live up to all of the high standards of the Sermon on the Mount in the New Testament, we would all be in a lot of trouble. Jesus would not have any brothers and sisters. What else could it mean? First and foremost, doing the will of God means believing in God and in his Christ. Secondly, it does mean obeying God, also. We can be helped by Christ’s summary of doing the will of God in his words about the Great Judgment: “Then the King will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’” This is an extensive list, but it is by no means an exhaustive list. It does indicate some of the ways of obedience which make up the Christian life and flow out of faith and discipleship.

In addition to being called to believe in Jesus Christ and to obey him, we are also called to bring other people to him. This is best stated in the Great Commission

at the end of the gospel: “Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age.’” This is not optional. This is who we are and what we are about. This is an act of obedience to God and his Christ.

How, then, do we do the will of the God and Father of Jesus Christ? First, we are to believe in him as Lord and Savior, and so both be his disciple and also worship his God and Father. Second, we are to do the will of God by obeying the teachings of Jesus Christ, particularly the serving of human need. And third, we are to proclaim the gospel, teach the Bible, bring other people to Christ, and make disciples of all the nations of the world. All of this together is how we are to do the will of God. All of this together is how we are brother and sister to Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

On Friday evening at an annual Phi Beta Kappa dinner, I heard a professor of history from Randolph-Macon College talk about the United States of America here at the end of one millennium and the beginning of another. Doing the opposite of what he intended, his politically correct speech demonstrated the profound poverty and sterility of the liberal, secular understanding of life, humanity, and history in general, and of this nation in particular. The most profound thing he could think of to say was that America values equality and has a strong sense of fair play. Can you imagine? Is this what we have come down to?

The very perception of equality is a matter of faith. It is not simply the case that we are equal. In fact, it is not at all obvious that we are equal in any measurable way: intelligence, strength, wealth, power, fame, influence, or anything else. It is not enough to understand the American experience, let alone human life, simply to say that we are equal or even that we value equality. Instead, the historic language for this is that we are all “created” equal. Creation implies a Creator. The gifts and endowments we receive from the Creator indicate a relationship with him. Any attempt to understand the United States of America, let alone human life in general, apart from this relationship, is doomed to shallowness and failure.

The historian talked about people fleeing Europe to get away from the class structures of the society of the old world. Surely, in part, that is true. But there was something much more significant going on in the foundation of this nation. People were coming here in order to be able to worship God freely. As a nation, we cannot be understood apart from this. And there is no evidence that we can continue to exist without a commitment to the worship of God.

The significance of this talk about the United States of America is to say that the ancient language we have heard from the scripture about doing the will of God

continues to form the only adequate basis of understanding who we are and what we are about even today, as a people, as a nation, and as human beings. The fundamental problems of humanity are not simply economic, social, political, racial, psychological, or even military. The fundamental problem of human existence is the brokenness of our relationship with God and therefore with each other. We cannot fix this on our own. None of our other solutions touches it. That is why the invitation which Jesus extends to us to be restored to relationship with God, indeed to be children of God by being brothers and sisters of Christ, is so important and so appealing.

If all the historian can say has to do with equality and fairness, we are in sad shape. Something far greater than that is going on here. We who are invited to be children of the Creator are not cosmic accidents. We who are called to be brothers and sisters of the Lord of the Universe are not random gatherings of atoms and molecules. We whose destiny it is to enter the family of the people of God are more than members of a race or a class. We whose identity has its goal and meaning in the kingdom of heaven are more than citizens of a nation. We for whom Jesus has paid the price to call his own are more than producers and consumers in the economy.

Today's gospel reading all leads to this: Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and he is inviting us to be his brothers and sisters. I am glad to be in this wonderful world which God has made for us. I am grateful to be a citizen of the United States of America. But I am even more grateful for the offer and the opportunity to be a citizen of the kingdom of God and to be a member of the family of the people of God. We are just passing through here. Our true home is elsewhere. Indeed, our true family is elsewhere, the family of the people of God. Jesus is inviting us to be his brothers and sisters. The way he points out for us to accept is to believe, to obey, and to share this good news and invitation with others, gathering them here to Christ. Are you ready to be a child of God? "Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother, and sister, and mother."

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

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