

Thy Will Be Done

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Matthew 6:7-15

Sermon Series:
Pray Daily: Igniting
Our Passion for God

*Surrender...
captures the
essence of the
prayer "Thy
will be done."*

We are preaching through a series on The Lord's Prayer, and today's topic is the line in "Thy Will Be Done." As Pete has pointed out, the first three lines of The Lord's Prayer are about God—His name, His kingdom, His will, and the last three are about us—our needs, our sins, our temptations. I think the line "Thy will be done" is the critical turning point of The Lord's Prayer, because it determines whether we choose to live in light of who God is and His desire for us or not. There are really only two prayers in this life. My will be done or Thy will be done, and it has to do with who is in control. It is unnatural to let go of control, to pray "Thy will be done" and to mean it.

Everything we know, everything we have been taught, is that we are to be independent, autonomous and self-reliant. We have been conditioned by our culture to cling to control of our lives, relationships and circumstances. If we could pick a theme song for our culture, it might well be Frank Sinatra's song *I Did It My Way*. The hymns we are singing this morning are more reflective of the kingdom of God and the attitude God desires His people to have—Take My Life and Have Thine Own Way, Lord. Another song that came to mind this week is I Surrender All.

Surrender is a really good word, because it captures the essence of the prayer "Thy will be done." It's not a very popular concept in our day, and it often has negative connotations. But I want to propose to you today that surrender is necessary for the spiritual life and necessary for God's will to be done in our lives, in our church and in our world. If we want God's will, we will have to let go of control and completely give ourselves over to God and His will. Now, that is easier said than done. What I want to do this morning is look at this idea of surrender—what it is, what it looks like, how we get there and finally, what is the end result.

First, let's look at what surrender is or the posture of surrender. I said there are two kinds of prayers: My will be done or Thy will be done. As I said, we have been conditioned to pray, "My will be done." This is a willful posture that consciously or unconsciously clings to control. We are encouraged daily in many and varied ways, to pull up our boot straps, put on our best face and make our best efforts. This willful lifestyle is often ruled by self-interest, achievement, effort and determination and is best depicted by clenched fists that are clinging and grasping and holding on to what is desired. But the problem is that a clenched fist often also indicates a closed heart.

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go and let God.***

I know something about this way of living. I have always been a person concerned about doing things the right way and doing them well. That was true of me since I was a child. I tried really hard to be a good daughter, a good student, a good athlete, a good leader, and on it goes. I was admired, respected, even needed and liked, but I wasn't very happy. I was working really hard to be successful and liked, but there was this deep, inner awareness that the outer appearance was incongruent with inner life. I was insecure and afraid because I knew something could shift very quickly, and everything I worked so hard to gain could come crashing down at any moment. That world of the clenched fists was a very dark and exhausting kind of reality. And it wasn't really getting me the love and security I longed for. And it wasn't really changing me in the ways I needed and wanted.

There was a real turning point in my life when I came to a deeper, experiential understanding of God's unconditional acceptance of me. God loved me not because of anything I did, For God so loved the world—and me—that he sent his only son so that I could be saved. Salvation is a free gift of God's grace. And not only that, we are not left on our own to live the Christian life; God has given us his Holy Spirit to empower us to live the life he created us for. This was good news. This news changed my life. I could relax, let go, and receive God's gifts of grace and love and power. I came to realize

God didn't want my willfulness; He wanted my willingness to surrender to Him, to trust Him, and to allow Him to do what only He could do.

Rather than grasping and holding on, surrender is characterized as letting go and releasing. It comes not from striving but receiving the free gift of God's love and grace. It is not ruled by self-interest but by love for God and others. Rather than the hard rigidity of teeth-gritting determination, there is a softness, a loved-shaped willingness that says yes to God. It is opening our hands and opening our hearts, and it leads to a sense of being fully alive in Christ.

Picture: In his book *Surrender to Love*, David Benner gives a wonderful picture of what surrender looks like. The English word surrender carries the implication of putting one's full weight on someone or something. It involves letting go—a release of effort, tension and fear. And it involves trust. So Benner says floating on water is a wonderful image of surrender because you can't float until you let go.

My husband, Stuart, and I have been taking our son Nate to the pool, and I know that the first thing he needs to learn before he can learn to swim is to float. He has to learn to relax and trust that the water will hold him up. It's interesting to watch his process of learning. He will relax for a minute, but then he gets panicky and starts to flail his arms, reach out for one of us, or look up. As soon as he starts trying see where he is or do something, he starts to sink.

Life circumstances will take us where we do not want to go, and it is in that place of vulnerability that we know we are not in control. But it is there that God meets us in ways we did not know possible and changes us in ways we did not know we needed.

So it is with us. We need to stop searching, stop striving, and stop panicking. We need to surrender. We need to let go and let God. Now I don't say that glibly. Surrendering is risky business unless we believe the first two lines of The Lord's Prayer that Pete has addressed the last few weeks. We have to trust that God is our heavenly Father who loves us extravagantly, and we have to trust that living in His kingdom is good. Until we do, we won't really let go of the things we cling to for safety, security and significance.

St. Ignatius of Loyola notes that sin is unwillingness to trust that what God wants is our deepest happiness. Until we are absolutely convinced of this we will do everything we can to keep our hands on the controls of our lives, because we think we know better than God what we need for our fulfillment.

So what is surrender? It is the willingness—opening ourselves and trusting God and his love and goodness. What does surrender look like? It is the picture of floating. We let go, we discover we are in a river of God's love, grace and power. We allow him to carry us where he wills. "Thy will be done."

Now let's talk about the process of learning to surrender. How do we change from willfulness to willingness, from control to consent? It's really not a one-time lesson. It's something we grow in over the course of our Christian lives. Jesus, of course, is our ultimate model for what surrender

looks like as well as how we best learn this all-important spiritual reality. On the night before his death in the garden of Gethsemane, he wrestled in prayer asking, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done." What we see here are the practice of prayer and the pressure of pain. I think both are primary teachers in helping us learn to surrender to God.

Prayer is a key practice in which we encounter the living God. We see this over and over again in Jesus' life as he would get away for times with the Father. Unfortunately, many of us approach prayer with a willful stance, doing what we always do. We cling to our own agendas and ask God to bless them. Or we cling to a list of things we ought to pray for and try our hardest not to forget anything. Some of us feel so inadequate in praying, we don't do it at all. We would rather cling to doing the things we feel competent at rather than let go and learn the practice of prayer. Or we cling to doing things we think we can control or think will make a difference rather than giving ourselves over to God and the mystery of prayer. I know all those feelings. I've been there.

But prayer is a critical spiritual practice, because it is the ultimate act of faith and dependence. When we come to God in prayer, we have to let go of our compulsion to be in control and acknowledge that He is God and we are not. To pray means we have to change our posture, we have to let go of other things we could do, to be with God and to let

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Him do what only he can do. There is a deep mystery and vulnerability, and it is there that we meet God, we experience His unconditional love and acceptance, and we're changed.

My children have taught me a lot about God and living in His kingdom and living in His love. They have even taught me about prayer. Since my oldest was a baby, it has been my practice to rock my children at night. All day they are running, jumping, climbing, shouting, playing and doing what children do. But at night, we settle down, and before I put them in their beds, I just hold them and rock them in silence. In the silence, in the rocking, in the holding, I experience the love and joy of this child/parent relationship. And I think they do, too, because they still want it; they even seek it.

And it's occurred to me that we never stop needing to listen for the words of our heavenly parent, we never stop needing to be held in His arms, or to experience His deep and abiding love for us. The format of the 90-Days-of-Prayer guide is meant to help us with this kind of prayer. We listen for God's word as we read and meditate on the words of Scripture. We allow the love of God and the truth of His word to wash over us to renew our minds, transform our hearts and conform our wills to the will of God. I have found this kind of prayer transforming.

There are many different kinds of prayer, and God is pleased with any conversation we have with

Him. But it's important not to forget that the practice of prayer is primarily a means of encountering the living God and experiencing His love for us. It is a practice of devotion, not merely discipline. And, if understood in this way, I think it will be motivated by desire rather than merely duty. That is, prayer becomes something we desperately want, not merely something we ought to do.

So, the practice of prayer teaches us to surrender, and so does the pressure of pain. This is the truth; life is hard. Things happen to us we would not choose, and we experience pain we do not want. That is true for those who believe and those who don't. It was true for Jesus. He didn't just experience pain on the cross. He who suffered myriad disappointments and hardships in the course of his life and ministry as he interacted with his family, his disciples, the crowds and the religious leaders.

Life circumstances will take us where we do not want to go, and it is in that place of vulnerability that we know we are not in control. But it is there that God meets us in ways we did not know possible and changes us in ways we did not know we needed.

I am not talking in theory here. I could share many personal examples, but let me share about my first years in ordained ministry ten years ago in River Forest, Illinois. I was new to pastoral ministry and learning a new job. Within six months, the senior pastor resigned and was gone. I worked with him, three interim pastors and the new called

pastor –that and five different heads of staff–in the first two-and-a-half years of my ministry. But on top of that, my husband, Stuart, and I were trying to start a family and were struggling with issues of infertility. It was a tremendously stressful, painful and disorienting period in my life.

In the midst of that time, I became aware not only of how physically drained and tired I felt all time, but even more significantly, the lack of joy and the degree of bitterness and resentment I was experiencing in my life and ministry. I was trying to do the right thing. I wanted to please God. Why was all this happening to me? But eventually, I began to pay attention to what was going on in me. There were warning signs that something was wrong, and something needed to change, and that something was me.

I became aware again, at deeper levels, of control issues in my life. I saw those tendencies toward perfectionism and hyper-responsibility manifesting themselves in new and different ways. I had to take responsibility for my emotions and my actions. I had to offer myself to God to be transformed.

It was the pain of my life that made me aware of my ongoing tendencies to be in control. It was the pain that made me aware of my need to change. And it was the pain that brought me to the point of being willing to let go and let God. And to pray the prayer of Jesus, “Father, if you are willing take this cup from me, but not my will but yours be done.” It was a

deeper response of surrender to God than I had ever known. Again, I could not change myself; only God could, and He did as I surrendered to Him.

I learned again the beautiful truth of Romans 8:28: “All things together for good for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose.” That doesn’t mean all things are good, but we can trust the love, goodness and power of God to work all things for our good and for His glory.

And that’s the purpose of surrender, even in the pressure of pain, to clarify our purpose and our deepest desires. Let me ask you a very important question. What is it you want from Jesus? Take a moment to think about this and take a moment to express this to God. I don’t know what you said—maybe financial security, success, a good marriage, healthy and well-adjusted children, good health. I could go on and on. Those are understandable, normal human desires.

I was asked that question some years ago at a Brennan Manning conference. It was six months before we adopted our son Nate, years into the painful and prayerful process of transformation I described earlier. And he asked us to reflect on our true heart’s answer to this question. What is it you really want from Jesus? I began to think of things I have wanted and even prayed for over the years. I wanted a fruitful ministry. I wanted a good marriage. I wanted a family. I wanted to be a mother. And I began to think specifically of what these might look like. But it really

didn't sound right, and, finally, tears starting streaming down my face as I realized that what I really wanted more than anything in life was Jesus. I just wanted and needed Jesus and to know his love at deeper and deeper levels of my being and to know his power in my life.

What we think we want is often just a superficial desire. We were created for love—for a passionate relationship with God. We were created to live out God's will in our lives. There is a deep longing in our hearts that we are often too afraid to feel or that we try to satisfy with many other things. But that longing ultimately leads us to God, and if we can learn to live in God's love, to live in God's will, we will be more fully alive than we ever thought possible.

Our vision as a church is to be a "joyful, contagious, Christ-centered community devoted to loving and serving God and neighbors." We will not live into the reality of that vision apart from surrender. You'll also notice that the by-line of the Pray Daily Guide is "Igniting Our Passion for God." I know that as we surrender to God, we will experience His passionate love for us, and that, in turn, will ignite a passion for God in us.

The posture of surrender is a willingness to open hands and hearts—let go and let God. The picture of surrender is floating on the river of God's love and goodness and allowing Him to carry us where He will. The process of learning surrender

involves the practice of prayer and the pressure of pain. And all this will clarify our purpose and deepest desire—to experience God's passion for us and ignite our passion for Him. May it be so!

