

The Perfect Will of God

“Be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God.”

—Romans 12:2

MUCH IN THE APOSTLE

Paul’s epistle to the Romans has to do with the manner in which a Christian may show himself approved in God’s sight. Faith in the shed blood of the Redeemer is emphasized as one of the first essentials of an acceptable walk with God. It is not enough,

however, that we merely receive of divine grace through Christ’s redemptive work. To walk with God in this age means additionally to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, and those were steps of self-sacrifice. (I Pet. 2:21) Hence, we must give ourselves in sacrifice upon an altar made acceptable by Jesus’ blood. It is this that the apostle emphasizes in the verse just preceding our opening text, saying: “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service.”—Rom. 12:1

It is one thing to present ourselves in consecration to God, with the understanding that our lives are to be sacrificed in his service, yet quite another to faithfully fulfill our covenant with the Heavenly Father even unto death. We cannot know at the time of our consecration all that this may involve. It is necessary, then, to always maintain an attitude of full surrender to the will of God, and to resolutely and enthusiastically take each step as it is revealed to us through his Word and by his providences. (Luke 14:33) We are not to make a consecration to do God's will, and then merely continue the ordinary routine of life as though nothing had happened. After presenting our bodies living sacrifices to God, we should then earnestly seek to determine how he wants us to cooperate in consuming that sacrifice. Renouncing our former worldly ambitions and goals, we are to "prove," that is, examine and scrutinize, "that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God," and then endeavor to the best of our ability to carry it out.

One of the first things we should learn with respect to the divine will is that we are not to be "conformed to this world." We have been called out of the world and, therefore, can no longer be conformed to its ways. Now, instead of drifting along in the stream of selfish, worldly pleasure and ambition, we are to change course and go against the downward flow which surrounds us. Instead of any longer being conformed to the ways of the selfish world and the sinful flesh, we are to be "transformed." This transformation, Paul says, is by the "renewing" [Greek: renovation] of our minds; that is, by acquainting ourselves with the divine will

and steadfastly endeavoring to do it. The world is made up of fallen human beings, hence its pursuits, pleasures and spirit appeal to our fallen flesh. For this reason, it is easy to be conformed to the world, but it is a genuine struggle to be transformed in mind, heart and action so that we become servants of God instead of servants of the world or of our fallen flesh.

PROPER ESTIMATE OF SELF ESSENTIAL

The apostle does not leave the subject of mind renewal and consequent transformation of character in the realm of mere principle. Rather, he proceeds to give us practical suggestions of how it should affect our lives and what it actually means to know and do the perfect will of God. Continuing, he says: "For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith."—Rom. 12:3

The word "For" at the beginning of verse three places an important relationship between what precedes and what follows it. We are to be transformed in order that we may be enabled thus to know the will of God and, therefore, to do it. "For" we are not to think more highly of ourselves than we ought to think. At first it may seem as though there is no special linkage between these two thoughts, but actually there is a most important connection. By this sequence of argument, the apostle is reminding us that we cannot make progress in learning and proving God's will until we recognize our own lack of worthiness. If we attempt

to understand God's will from the viewpoint of how important we are concerning his purposes and service, we will fail to be pleasing to him.

This strikes right at one of the fundamental differences between the general spirit of the world and that of the Christian. From the worldly standpoint, most consider it necessary to advance themselves and promote their interests and to have others help them to that end. In order, therefore, to ensure their elevation many deceive themselves into an exaggerated sense of self-importance and do all they can to induce others to feel the same way toward them. Furthermore, this is considered quite proper in the world, where the grace of humility is often considered an evidence of weakness.

From the worldly standpoint, it would appear essential to appraise ourselves rather highly lest we be considered a defeatist and possessed of a broken spirit. This philosophy assumes that we must believe fully in ourselves and our ability, otherwise we can never succeed in this world of rivalry and competition. With such a philosophy it would only be natural for us to think of ourselves very highly, and, therefore, to do all we can to have others think of us in the same way. This philosophy and its spirit, however, though prevalent among many in the world, should find no reception in any of those purporting to be the people of God.—Gal. 6:3

The apostle knew that one of the most important evidences of transformation from the spirit of the world to the spirit of God should be the renouncing of one's self-importance. When we get the Lord's viewpoint in this matter, we will realize that if we think of ourselves in any sense as being worthy, in

our own right, of God's blessings or of promotion in his service, we are thinking of ourselves "more highly" than we should. Paul suggests that what we need to do is to "think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith."

Elsewhere we are told that "by grace" we are saved, "through faith." (Eph. 2:8) If our sober, self-appraisal, is based upon what we are through faith, it means our recognition of the fact that apart from the grace of God we are nothing. This means that if we think of ourselves as being important and indispensable, we are, to that extent, blocking the transforming work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts and lives. Whatever of favor God bestows upon us is by his grace, and not because we merit it. God accepts our service to him as an evidence of our appreciation, through faith, of his love and grace, but we cannot obtain that grace by our own works.

MANY MEMBERS

Having reminded us that we are to have a humble, sober estimation of ourselves, and that all the privileges we enjoy are by his grace, then the apostle proceeds to show that knowing and being faithful to the divine will involves a recognition of the fact that we are not to be isolationists in the divine arrangement. There are "many members" in the body of Christ, and among these God has graciously determined a place for us. In this arrangement we are all "members one of another." It is God's will that this should be, and for us to ignore it, or to go contrary to it, would mean that we are not being transformed, and not properly proving what is the acceptable and perfect will of God.—Rom. 12:4,5

A proper recognition of the fact that we are “members one of another” is largely dependent upon not thinking of ourselves more highly than we ought to think. The worldly viewpoint is one of self-interest, self-promotion, irrespective of the welfare and interests of others. The Christian viewpoint, by contrast, is that of interest in the “many members”—a concern for the welfare of the body, regardless of individual advantage. It is only, therefore, as we develop interest in and love for the brethren of Christ that we are glad to count ourselves insignificant as individuals in order that the body as a whole may prosper.

This constitutes a real test of the measure to which our hearts and minds have been transformed from the ways and spirit of the world to the spirit of Christ. We sometimes sing, “O! to be nothing, nothing, Only to lie at his feet,” but how do we feel when the Lord takes us at our word and permits us to reside humbly at his feet for a while? Perhaps we are inclined to say that if the Lord invites us to lie at his feet and be nothing, we will gladly do it. However, if, through other causes, we are humbled or set aside, we may be tempted to fight for our rights.

As Christians, however, we should recognize that there are no outside causes that can shape our experiences or our destiny. We are wholly in the Lord’s hand, and all that we have and are, are by his grace and overruling providences. (Lam. 4:2; Isa. 64:8) Nothing can happen to us unless God permits it, and whatever he allows is for our highest spiritual welfare. (Luke 12:6,7) We may have planned some service for God and the truth, and then became ill. The first inclination of the flesh

may be to lay the blame on someone or something. Difficulties more complex than becoming ill may also interfere with what we have planned to do for the Lord. We may feel like blaming individuals, even fellow members of the body, for standing in our way, but this should not be. If others are indeed to blame, we can safely leave the matter in God's hands. For ourselves, however, we should recognize that whatever our experiences may be is all by divine permission, and whatever God permits is for our best interests and in the best interest of the body as a whole. Our readiness to acquiesce to the divine will in all these experiences will be in proportion to the measure of our faith in God's grace and in our genuine interest in the "many members," of which we are striving to be a part.

If we have made a proper appraisal of ourselves, and truly recognize that it is only by God's grace that we are in the body at all, then our faith should accept without any mental reservations whatever experiences divine wisdom may permit. If, on the other hand, we still have some of the worldly spirit of getting ahead and of being esteemed highly in the eyes of others, we will undoubtedly find it hard when things do not go our way. Let us, rather, capture the true spirit of sacrifice and recognize that we have covenanted to give up our own will completely, figuratively "beheaded for the witness of Jesus, and for the word of God." (Rev. 20:4) Thus, we will not mind what God's providences may permit now, just so long as they help us to prove what his "perfect will" is for us.

The entire earthly life of a Christian is one of preparation for future service in glory. It is a life of

humble sacrifice, together with the peace and joy of spiritual attainment. We are to look for opportunities to serve even in our humiliation. In addition, often by divine providence, we are permitted to experience special trials in order to first be humbled and thus prepared for some particular service. God has dealt with many of his servants along this line. Moses, for example, whom God used mightily, was permitted to go into obscurity for forty years prior to the time his service for God began.—Exod. 3:1; Acts 7:29,30

Moses, by natural qualifications and education was well prepared for the Lord's work forty years before he was called to enter it. However, there was a further development necessary which was accomplished in exile and obscurity. It was a humble position, indeed, tending his father-in-law's flocks, but the Lord did not forget Moses, and when the time came, he was brought forth into prominence as the leader of God's people. (Heb. 11:23-29) There is no occasion to fear that the Lord will forget us when the time comes for him to use us in his service. We may, in our weaknesses, forget each other, but the Lord will never forget. Often, we may long to serve the Lord more than we do, and perhaps we fret at the restraints that hold us back. Let us rather make sure that we are properly using the little privileges of service that are already ours, meanwhile leaving larger opportunities in the Lord's hands, to give us when his wisdom deems best.

GIFTS OF GOD'S GRACE

In Romans 12:6 the apostle explains that the "many members" have "gifts differing according to

the grace that is given to us.” Then he enumerates some of these gifts, such as: prophesying; ministering; teaching; exhorting; ruling; giving; and showing mercy. It is important to note that these gifts are all manifestations of God’s grace. (Rom. 12:7,8) It must be assumed, therefore, that not only the gifts, but the opportunities of using the gifts in the divine service, are also by God’s grace.

Furthermore, it is quite possible to miss opportunities of service through a failure to give heed to the instruction not to think more highly of ourselves than we ought to think. A failure along this line may cause us to overlook the smaller privileges of service while looking for and seeking after the larger opportunities. God’s dealings with his people are based on the scriptural principle that one who is faithful in that which is least will also be faithful in that which is much. This being true, it may be that the larger opportunities we crave are being held back until we have proved faithful in the little things.—Luke 16:10

Paul’s list of the many ways in which God’s people are able to serve him, and his admonition to faithfulness in the use of all these gifts of divine grace, indicate that it is the Heavenly Father’s will that all of his people serve. The Christian life is therefore not merely one of passive humility in the Lord’s hands. It is that indeed, but it is also a life of activity in the divine cause. (Mark 10:43-45; Gal. 5:13; James 2:15-17) It is a life of activity, however, that must be based upon a proper humility before God. There can be no acceptable service to God apart from this. Conversely, it is also impossible to exercise true humility before God without being

thoroughly engaged in laying down our lives in his service, because this is what he has bidden us to do. In fact, to refuse to do what he has asked of us in the way of service would prove that we are not humble, but that we think more highly of our own opinions than we ought to think.

THE DAY OF SMALL THINGS

No matter what opportunity of service divine grace may give to us, we should seek to use it faithfully. Faithfulness in the use of such a gift is the true test of our appreciation of it. However, it is along this very line that the spirit of the world may tend to creep in, so that we may ignore the little service as being of no consequence, while our hearts are set on doing something big for the Lord. The widow's "two mites" did not accomplish anything great for the Jews' treasury, but her faithfulness in doing "all" she could, when what she had was so very little, did much for her in that it brought her the Lord's commendation, which "maketh rich."—Mark 12:41-44; Prov. 10:22

We should not despise "the day of small things." (Zech. 4:10) If we have the gift of oral witnessing to a large group, let us be faithful in its use, but let us be just as happy to witness to one person, unnoticed and unknown, as we would be to hundreds or thousands. One of the greatest sermons the Lord preached was to the woman of Samaria at the well. Jesus could speak to the multitude, but he was also happy to comfort the ones and twos. If we are following in Jesus' footsteps, we will be more concerned with the degree of our faithfulness in service than we are in the size of our opportunity to serve.

Many years ago, there was the case of a sister in Christ who had spent a number of years in direct service to the Lord. During that time, she suffered injuries that curtailed her ability to serve as she had previously. She was an invalid for some period before finishing her course in death. During that time, she made the acquaintance of a lady who, after a time, became somewhat interested in the Gospel message. Just a few days before the sister's death, she received a message that this friend was coming to see her. The sister decided that she would make one last effort to help this acquaintance come to a better understanding and appreciation of the Truth. She asked her nurse to bring her two Bibles and two hymn books. When the friend arrived the sister held a meeting with her, in which they both joined in reading the Scriptures, singing and praying.

On the surface, this was not any great service for the Lord. It did not compare with the sister's earlier life of active service when she was used to point out the way of truth to many, but it did represent the faithful use of the "mite" of strength and opportunity that God's grace still permitted her to enjoy. How the Lord must have looked down with joy upon that sister, who, although her body was frail and no doubt racked with pain, yet was keeping it on the altar of sacrifice, and with it praising God until the offering was consumed.

There is, of necessity, the need for growth in the Christian way. The very thought of transformation indicates a gradual change. It follows, then, that at the beginning of the Christian way we may be somewhat influenced by the worldly viewpoint in connection with all our endeavors to know and do

God's will. However, as we "grow in grace" we should be able to recognize more clearly that being humble before God and being faithful in the little and obscure opportunities are the things that really count.—II Pet. 3:18

This is true irrespective of the nature of the gifts God's grace may have imparted to us. Take the gift of exhortation, for example. We should all possess and use this faithfully. We can all exhort one another to faithfulness, even if it is only by the example of our own conduct and manner of life. There are very few of us who do not have an occasional opportunity to speak a word of exhortation to a fellow traveler in the narrow way. Are we faithfully using these opportunities, even if, at times, it may be out of season for us to do so? On the other hand, are we overlooking the privileges that daily may be ours, while waiting for a spectacular opportunity that may never come?

The same may be said of any or all of the gifts of God's grace. Faithfulness in their use should be concentrated mostly on the small things. Take the matter of "giving," as mentioned by the apostle. The whole Christian life should be one of giving. We are to give our time, our strength, our talents, our means, our all. Our giving starts when we respond to the Lord's invitation, "My son, give me thine heart." (Prov. 23:26) When we give our hearts, our motives, and our affections to the Lord, we become his, to serve him with our whole being forever.

Having given all to God, he instructs us, through his Word, how we are to then give to others. We are told that we are to provide for our own, for example, and this we must do. (I Tim. 5:8) We should not use

this as an excuse, however, to hold back from the Lord that which should be given directly to him. It may, and frequently does, require considerable time to take care of the obligations which the Lord's will imposes upon us with respect to our earthly obligations, hence there is often very little left to give directly in the service of the Heavenly Father. In view of this there may be a temptation not to give the little that may be possible.

What is true with respect to the giving of time may also be true along other lines. We could be tempted to say, "I wish I had a large sum of money to put into the Lord's work," but would we put it into the work if we had it? The answer is found in the measure of faithfulness we display in giving the "mite" that is currently within our power to give. When examining our own hearts to determine how faithful we would be in the use of large opportunities, let us be sure we are faithful in the small things. If we wish that we could give all our time and strength to the Lord, he will determine the depth and sincerity of that wish by the measure of zeal with which we give to him the little time and strength that is presently our privilege to give. If we hold back from rendering even the smallest service to him just because it is small, we may not be entrusted with the use of the larger opportunities.

SINCERE IN LOVE

In Romans 12:9 the apostle says, "Let love be without dissimulation." The Greek word here used has the thought of sincerity, without hypocrisy. The love mentioned is primarily for God, but automatically should embrace all of God's people, the

“many members” in the body. The emphasis thus placed upon the sincerity of our love is another reminder of the transformation that should be going on in our hearts and lives. There is a great deal of veneer in the world which feigns an interest in others, but often the motive is a selfish one.

The motive back of Christian endeavor and activity should be sincere and wholehearted, influencing all that we do. That motive, moreover, should be one of genuine love for God and for his people. It should not be mixed with any degree of selfishness, or self-interest. With this fact the apostle couples the admonition, “Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good.” One of the greatest evils in God’s sight is that of hypocrisy, and one of the principal elements of what God considers “good” is sincerity. The robe of Christ’s righteousness covers our unwilling imperfections, but that provision does not cover the sins of hypocrisy and insincerity.

The apostle continues throughout the remainder of Romans, chapter 12, and on through chapters 13, 14, and much of 15, mentioning one detail after another of that which is involved in proving what is the perfect will of God. Those details explain the Christian’s proper attitude toward both brethren and enemies. They point out our proper attitude toward the world and toward earthly governments. They cover, in fact, practically every aspect of the Christian life. To acquaint ourselves with these instructions, and to have our lives molded by them, should be our earnest desire and effort.

It is in doing this that we are separated more and more from the world and its spirit, and are transformed by the renewing of our minds. Thus,

we are having worked out in our lives the will of God as it pertains to the manner in which we are to continue presenting our bodies a living sacrifice to him. It is interesting, and important, to note that in all the details of God's will for the sacrificing Christian found in the Scriptures, outside of legitimate temporal responsibilities, there is nothing said about protecting self-interests; but much said about sacrificing self in the interests of others, and for the glory of God.

It is this, the denial of self, the blessing of others, and the glory of God, that constitutes his "good, and acceptable, and perfect will" for us who have presented ourselves in sacrifice to him. It is vital that we have a working knowledge of the divine will for us, else we might put forth much effort in supposing that we are serving God only to discover that we had been "as one that beateth the air." (I Cor. 9:26) Let us, rather, be faithful to our calling, that the richness of our lives may be in the realization of God's grace, and in the hope of partaking of his glory.—Rom. 5:2 ■

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