

On Earth as it Is in Heaven

Matt 5:18-20, 6: 9 - 10

¹⁸ Truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. ¹⁹ Anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. ²⁰ For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.^{6:9} "This, then, is how you should pray:" 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, ¹⁰ your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

One of the great themes of the New Testament is one of those things that we may hear so much about that it doesn't actually register in us the way it could. There's a line in the Great Thanksgiving of our Communion ritual that goes like this:

By the baptism of his [Jesus'] suffering, death, and resurrection you gave birth to your church and delivered us from slavery to sin and death.

We tend to talk about our delivery from *death* in the church frequently – particularly at funerals, and on Easter, or even last week, as HY in her powerful message quoted that Princeton professor who recognized “That the church is a family of people who know how to die.” We'll talk about our delivery from death, but we don't seem to talk too much about our delivery from *sin*.

Now, catch the difference – we do talk frequently about the *forgiveness* of our sins, it is our great joy to be proclaimers of God's Grace. But *deliverance* from sin is a bit different than simple forgiveness. One addresses the cause and the other, the effect.

Kind of like a person who goes to a hospital to have a broken arm set. And the ER docs notice that this is the third time this person has come in for a broken bone. So, they discover that the person has an obsession for climbing trees, is not careful. Well, they can continue to reset bones: that would be like forgiveness. But addressing that compulsion, or teaching them to be a safer tree climber, that would be deliverance!

In the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Philippians, Paul writes of his confidence in this: “*that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.*”

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The good work that God began in us is what we referred to a couple of weeks ago in God's fixing what was 'broken' in the Fall. It will *all* be completed in at the end, in the new heaven and the new earth, in all aspects: physically, emotionally, spiritually, we will be completely new, along with all of creation itself.

That's our firm hope as believers in Christ. God will finish what God has started.

Now, to one degree or another, that reconstruction project is already well under way for anyone who has said 'yes' to Jesus' invitation to discipleship. We are 'new creations' in Christ... we 'daily putting to death the deeds of the flesh' and 'putting on Christ' (all Biblical expressions). But just like all the things we've been looking at over this series of messages, this is an 'already/not yet' proposition.

God *has* begun something new in us, but it is not finished. And it won't be completely finished until we see God face to face in eternity. For now, we try and make progress toward our goals.

One of those goals is the deliverance from sin. Now, what does that mean?

It means that God wants to deal with the foundation parts of our beings, the parts of us that insists on doing things our own way, on putting ourselves first, on our deciding on what is important and what is not... see, 'sin' is a simple word that pretty much covers anything we do that is not in line with God's will for us.

The 'goal' then can be stated just as simply: we want to be like Jesus. We want to have the 'mind of Christ'. Jesus said in John that he didn't do anything unless he 'saw the Father doing it'. And, really, that is our goal as well. To do God's will. To be obedient to God.

This is so important that when Jesus was asked to teach his first disciples how to pray, he said, "Pray like this: (and look what comes *first*)

*"Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven..."*

This is an example of a very Jewish way of speaking, called Parallelism. It's where the same thought is expressed in two different ways – we see this in the Psalms all the time. When Jesus

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says, “your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” *both* of those clauses are saying the *same* exact thing.

As we’ve been pointing out, God’s Kingdom is one of rule, not boundaries. Wherever God rules, *that* is the kingdom of heaven. In the very presence of God (which, as we’ve also been seeing, is the essence of heaven) God’s rule would be, obviously, perfect. When that perfect heavenly rule comes to earth, *that* is the Kingdom of God/ Heaven on earth. And Jesus says, “Pray this will happen!” And every time we pray the Lord’s Prayer, that’s what we’re asking for.

And it is happening. Right *here!* But, again, not completely!

We all understand this, don’t we? There isn’t a person here who takes the call of Christ seriously who has not wrestled with themselves, as to ‘why did I do/ say/ think/ plan/ follow through, etc. on *that?*’ *again...* why couldn’t I have let that Go? Why can’t I forgive that person? Why am I so angry/ jealous / lustful – whatever – it’s who we are. We all struggle with these things.

We are forgiven every time we cross the line between God’s will and ours. But God also promises us that there will be a *deliverance* from sin. A time will come when we won’t have that constant inner struggle going on between self-will and God’s will. And like everything else in the Kingdom of God, that work, while awaiting completion in heaven, is already begun in the Kingdom of Heaven - **here**. Plainly: our deliverance from sin begins *now*.

Now you know we do make an effort to respect your positions on a lot of issues, particularly, political. So, we’ve prayed for the election process without trying to tell you how to vote in the past election. And we would have prayed for the winner regardless of their affiliation. But I’ve got to say, whatever your political persuasion, I don’t know how you could not have been impressed with President Obama’s inauguration speech.

He talked about some things that are tremendously important issues – particularly that of our taking personal responsibility for our actions, and not allowing expediency to dictate our policies, he said we have more to build on than that. That same message is especially true for

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believers in Christ! It was a timely message that I pray is not coming too late. I just read the result of a poll by the Josephson Institute, a Los-Angeles-based ethics institute, who conducted a character survey of nearly 30,000 students at 100 randomly selected high schools nationwide. Among the findings:

Sixty-four percent of students said they had cheated on a test in the past year.

Thirty percent had stolen from a store.

Forty-two percent said they would lie to save money.

Eighty-three percent said they had lied to their parents about something significant.

Despite their – admitted - transgressions, 93 percent of the students surveyed said they were satisfied with their personal ethics and character, with 77 percent adding, "I am better than most people I know."¹

Now, I'm not picking on students or young people. Because this is learned behavior. And these kids learned this from my generation. Our country is in a crisis mode not just economically, but morally and spiritually. The plan of Jesus Christ from the start was for the community of faith – the Kingdom of God – to be a shining example of righteousness in this world. We were meant to be clear examples of a different way of life that is well worth living. A way of righteousness.

Not *self*-righteousness, which sadly, it has too often come to; not judgment, but an example – a city on a hill, shining light example, a winsome, joyful, living out of a new relationship of peace with God that others would see; and in seeing this, would desire what we have found. And then we have the privilege of sharing. This was God's plan. And still is.

There are, I believe, countless examples of Christians who are doing what we've been called to do. And praise God, many are to be found here.

But there are, perhaps, too many others who follow a Christ of expediency; who, instead of pursuing their deliverance from sin, prefer instead, what Dallas Willard called 'sin management' – which keeps us from being 'too bad', but never addresses the root of the issues.

¹ Hugh Poland, Kingwood, Texas; source: David Crary, "Students lie, cheat, steal, but say they're good," www.chron.com (11-30-08)

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This is not what we've been called to. People who are obedient to God, i.e., those who *do the will of God on earth* are one of the most powerful hints of heaven that we have on this earth. Powerful, because that witness is what God uses to bring others into the joy of his Kingdom and love. If there is no light, people cannot see. And we are the light of the world.

C. S. Lewis, in Mere Christianity

*Christ says, "Give me all. I don't want so much of your time and so much of your money and so much of your work: I want you. I have not come to torment your natural self, but to kill it. No half-measures are any good. I don't want to cut off a branch here and a branch there. I want to have the whole tree down. I don't want to drill the tooth, or crown it, or stop it, but to have it out. Hand over the whole natural self, all the desires which you think are innocent as well as the ones you think are wicked—the whole outfit. I will give you a new self instead. In fact, I will give you myself: my own will shall become yours."*²

This is what deliverance from sin is about. It's what God wants to do in each of us. that is the work that God has begun which he promises he will bring to completion. We are called to be a people among whom God's will is done, right here on earth, as it is in heaven.

Now, when we talk about God's will being done, I know a lot of different thoughts pop into our minds. And I'm going to leave a lot of this discussion to our Wednesday night groups. But let me lay this on you – I don't think God is a micromanager! I really do believe that our free will means something. We can choose, and not all choices are between 'good' and 'bad' things.

So I make a distinction between seeking out God's best 'route' for our lives, and this *first* level of 'doing God's will', which I think is much more about the broader issues of the Kingdom: namely, "*Loving the Lord with all your heart and mind and soul and strength, and your neighbor as yourself.*" In the first reading this morning, we hear Jesus again, saying

¹⁸ *Truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished...whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.*

² C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (HarperOne, 2001), p. 196-197

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Jesus said the whole Law hung on two commands: Love God and love your neighbor. Work it out! When we read about doing the will of God this is where we should go first.

So, those general guidelines should inform *any* decision we make – but there are multiple paths we can take in vocations, in relationships, etc. that can all be blessed by God. Maybe one would be better than another, and in that sense we could say is God's 'will', I don't know... but I think that doing God's will as Jesus refers to in the Lord's prayer is all about being the people of love and grace that he called us to be, not, 'did I choose the right college', or 'did I make the right retirement investment', etc.

But living out those two commands will be a struggle for us until it is happening in our lives completely. Because this is all about, as C. S. Lewis wrote: our total surrender to God. Nothing held back.

A more recent preacher, John Ortberg, put it like this in a message called "Choices":

I can't live Jesus' life and Jesus knows that, but he says: You can ask me to come and live my life in you.

I'll give you a picture of this. Nancy and I were in a part of the country we had never been before. We were going to be driving on obscure back roads, so we got a rental car, and the guy at the counter said to me, "Along with this car, if you want, you can also get a GPS system." Have you ever used a GPS system? You plug it in and punch in your destination. A woman's voice will tell you how to get wherever it is you are going. Well, when the guy at the counter asked if I wanted one, my immediate response was, "No. That is going to cost something. I don't need that. I can find where I'm going without that." Anybody want to guess what my wife weighed in with? "Get the GPS." So, we got the GPS.

Here's the deal: You can get the box. You can have the lady in the car, but that doesn't mean you trust her. If you trust her, what do you do? You do what she says. You go where she tells you to go. She says, "Turn left," you turn left. If she says, "Turn left," and in your heart you think, *But I want to turn right*, you remember, *There is a way that seemeth right unto man, but the end thereof is death*. Okay?

To follow Jesus means I will do what he says. I will mess up a lot. I'm going to need his power. I know that, but I form the intention. I say to him, "God, with your help, as best I can, I will do what you say. I will give you my life, my time, my obedience."

Here is the thing: If that is not your settled intent, then it is best to be honest about it. If that is not your settled intent, then whatever else you might be, you are not a follower of Jesus. An admirer, maybe. But he is looking for followers. He is looking for somebody who will say, "All right, God."

There is something else you need to know about him—something that is also true when dealing with a GPS system. At one point when we were driving in this car, I was quite sure the

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lady was wrong. She said to go left, and I didn't go left. I went right, because I knew she was wrong. Then as an interesting response, she said, "Recalculating route. When safe to do so, execute a U-turn." I knew she was wrong, so I unplugged her. That's the beauty of that little box. You can unplug her.

I got lost as a goose. My wife enjoyed that immensely.

So we plugged that lady back in, and you know what she said? "I told you so, you little idiot." She said, "You think I'm going to help you now? You rejected me. You just find your way home by yourself." No—she didn't say that. She said, "Recalculating route. When safe to do so, execute a U-turn."

Now see, that's grace. As soon as you're ready to listen, as soon as you're ready to surrender, God will say, "Here is the way home. Execute a U-turn." That's repentance. "I'll bring you home." That is grace. That's Jesus. He is the only one with authoritative wisdom about how to live. He is the only one who brings about the possibility of forgiveness for your sin and mine. He is the only one to give any kind of realistic hope of conquering death, of life beyond the grave.

Why would you not give your full devotion to Jesus? He does not present himself as a good, spiritual teacher to be admired from a distance. He presents himself as Master, as Lord, as the one to be followed and served and obeyed and worshiped. There is no other way. He is it.³

In his book, *Thoughts in Solitude*, Thomas Merton wrote fifteen lines that have become known as "the Merton Prayer": [we've printed this in your bulletins, and we're going to pray it as we close today. But first, I'd like to give you a moment to read it so you can pray with your mind and heart as well as your lips.]

*My Lord God,
I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
Nor do I really know myself,
and the fact that I think I am following your will does not mean that I am actually doing so.
But I believe that the desire to please you does in fact please you.
And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.
And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road,
though I may know nothing about it.
Therefore I will trust you always though I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.
I will not fear,
for you are ever with me,
and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.⁴ Amen.*

³ John Ortberg, in his sermon "Choices," www.preachingtoday.com

⁴ Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), p. 79