

How *Does* Sanctification Work? (Part 3)¹



by DAVID POWLISON

This is the will of God—your sanctification.

1 Thessalonians 4:3a

What is God’s will for *you*?

We don’t usually ask about God’s will when we make daily decisions. Should I buy grapes or avocados? Should I read Obadiah or Jude today? There may be reasons to prefer one over the other, but there’s no right or wrong in such decisions.

We more frequently wonder “What is God’s will?” when it comes to important life decisions. Where should I go to school? What job should I pursue? Who will I marry? What church do my spouse and I commit to? Where will my family put down roots? These might seem like they are the biggest life decisions, the places we most need direct guidance. These questions are important, and the decisions have consequences. There may be better or worse reasons to choose one commitment over another, and we do need wisdom. Yet such items are not on God’s written list of what he wills for us. He never promises to give us “handwriting on the wall” guidance.

David Powlison (MDiv, PhD) is the executive director of CCEF and edits the Journal of Biblical Counseling.

¹ Parts 1 and 2 of this series appeared in the *Journal of Biblical Counseling* 27:1 and 27:2. From this series, I have developed a book that will be published in spring 2017 by Crossway.

I vividly remember what a wise professor said to a group of us seminarians as we entered our last year of pastoral studies. “You are all wondering what God’s will is for your future ministry. Listen well to what I am about to say. It may be relatively indifferent whether you eventually become a pastor in Kalamazoo or a missionary in Timbuktu. That’s a choice between two good things. Yes, you will need to decide. Pray for wisdom. Realistically assess yourself. Consider the objective needs and opportunities. Make a pros and cons list. Talk with people who know you and who know the situation. Then choose. If the reasons on each side are evenly balanced, you might even flip a coin—the apostle who replaced Judas was chosen that way! But it may be a matter of life or death whether or not you decide to cross the street. . . . [five second pause while we puzzled over what he meant] . . . If you spot an old friend from whom you’ve been estranged walking on the other side of the street, God *really* cares what you do next. Will you walk on, pretending not to notice? Or will you cross the street? It is God’s definite, revealed will that you seek to reconcile. This choice is life-or-death important.”

God urgently calls us to seek peace in the midst of strife, as my professor pointed out. If you remain angry, judgmental, and avoidant, you will certainly perish. God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble, enabling us to become peaceable and constructive.²

God’s will is your sanctification.

That’s how Paul summarized matters for the Thessalonian church (1 Thess 4:3a). And handling frayed relationships is not the only area where God’s will for us is clear. As Paul continued in this letter, he specifically identified God’s gracious will for us regarding sexual purity in the midst of an immoral world (4:3b–7). When it comes to the object of your sexual desires and who you sleep with, questions of right or wrong are always on the table.

Here’s another example. Our loving Father pointedly wills that we learn to live with no complaining about the present, no regrets about the past, and no worrying about the future.³ This is a high, hard calling! We fail. But our

² This paragraph alludes to Matthew 5:9, 18:15–35, Galatians 5:20–21, and James 4:6, 3:17–18.

³ Consider the implications of Philippians 2:14, 3:13–14 and 4:6 for how we view the present, the past, and the future.

failures, honestly acknowledged, open a wide door into mercies new every morning. And Christ freely commits to teaching us the secret of contentment amid a world filled with stressors. Most of us are in the remedial class, but any progress in the direction of such significant wisdom is worth more than silver, gold, and jewels. “Nothing you desire can compare,” as Proverbs 3:14–15 puts it.

Christ is working to make your life beautiful.

And another example. God repeatedly states his will regarding how we view money. Money-love is metastasizing cancer; it will enslave you and devour your soul. Worrying about money overtly demonstrates a failure of faith.⁴ The signs of good financial health are gratitude, trust, generosity, and living within your means. That is another high, hard calling! But the God of grace and power enrolls all his beloved children in a life-long financial rehab program.

Still one more example. (I’m only mentioning things so important that God repeatedly brings up the topic.) The Lord is deeply concerned with how we talk with each other. The tongue is a river of life; the tongue is an arsonist. Words create beauty; words create wreckage. Good words grow us up in every way into Christ (Eph 4:15). The right words give grace to whoever is listening (Eph 4:29). So, what do you say (and not say) in a difficult conversation? And do you listen before you speak? And what attitude is your tone of voice conveying? God is listening attentively to every careless word (Matt 12:36).

God wills to cure us of all the wrongs we have been discussing: immoralities, hostilities, complaints, regrets, anxieties and a hundred other ugly things. Christ is forgiving, and Christ is working to make your life beautiful. When you see him face to face, you will be like the Savior we have trusted.

It’s important to remember that Scripture discusses “the will of God” in two complementary ways, each of which is relevant to sanctification. In

⁴ See 1 Timothy 6:10 and Matthew 6:19–24 on loving money, and Matthew 6:25–34 on worrying about money.

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