



### **CHAPTER THREE SUMMARY**

We are to do as God does; we are to will what God wills. But what is God's will for human life? How do we know what it is and do it? The Holiness Code in Leviticus, with its ethical directives and detailed rules for living, is one kind of approach to an answer. The Sermon on the Mount grounds morality in a prayerful relationship with God. In the Lord's Prayer we ask that, in submission to God's intentions, what we cannot do ourselves will be done in us and through us.

### **BASIC BIBLE REFERENCES**

Leviticus 17-26, especially Chapter 19  
Matthew 5-7, especially Chapter 5

### **WORD LIST**

grace  
Holiness Code  
jubilee  
Sermon on the Mount



## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **Willing Obedience**

Prayer is not only asking God for what we want; it is asking what God wants of us. Kneeling to present our requests is an acknowledgement of the Sovereign's right to command. Prayer is our admission that we were made for obedience, that duty is the core of blessedness. Some readers will be familiar with the first question and answer of the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, which expresses the same truth:

Q: What is the chief end of man?

A: Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.

Running through the Psalms like a recurring melody is this theme: happy and blessed are those who love God's law and seek to do God's will.

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked...  
but their delight is in the law of the LORD... (Psalm 1:1-2)

Happy are those who fear the LORD,  
who greatly delight in his commandments. (Psalm 112:1)

Happy are those whose way is blameless,  
who walk in the law of the LORD.

Happy are those who keep his decrees,  
who seek him with their whole heart,  
who also do no wrong, but walk in his ways. (Psalm 119:1-3)

Happy is everyone who fears the LORD,  
who walks in his ways.

You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands;  
you shall be happy, and it shall go well with you. (Psalm 128:1-2)

What does God want from us? What is this way that leads to blessedness? And how shall we find it? There are several gemlike summaries of God's will in Scripture. The best-known, surely, is Jesus' summary of the law and the prophets in Matthew 22:37-39:

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”

For those who want more extended statements of God's will, there is Jesus' Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7 and the so-called “Holiness Code” of Leviticus 17-26.

## **The Holiness Code**

The Bible contains a number of law codes. None is more remarkable than **Leviticus 17-26**. Scholars are in general agreement that these chapters constitute a literary unity. The name usually given to it is “The Holiness Code.” It is presented to the reader as having been given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai. Turn to this Code now and skim through the chapters. If your Bible has subheadings, notice the divisions of the material. Here is a glorious mixture of all kinds of rules and regulations. As one commentator, writing in *The Interpreter's Bible* (Abingdon, Vol. II, 1953) says of it:

It treats of the blood of slain beasts, of sexual ethics, of general morality, of regulations about haircutting, of rules connected with fruit trees, of wizards, and the duty owed to parents, of the ecclesiastical calendar, of oil for lamps, and blasphemy, of Sabbaths, and the year of jubilee, and the treatment of servants, of idolatry, of divine promises and threats.

The Code contains what Jesus called the second great commandment: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Ch. 19:18b) Embedded in the Code are also elements of the Ten Commandments: “You shall each revere your mother and father.” (Ch. 19:3a) “You shall keep my Sabbaths.” (v. 3b) “You shall not steal.” (v. 11a) “You shall not deal falsely; and you shall not lie to one another.” (v. 11b, c) “And you shall not swear falsely by my name, profaning the name of your God.” (v. 12)

In much more extended form than the Ten Commandments, however, the Holiness Code is an attempt to express in concrete and specific terms God's will for human life. Modern readers are very likely put off, even repelled by the Holiness Code. In some instances it seems unnecessarily concrete: “You shall not uncover the nakedness of your father, which is the nakedness of your mother; she is your mother, you shall not uncover her nakedness.” (Ch. 18:7) Some of its rules for religious rituals seem overly concerned with details, as with the instructions for making bread for the Tabernacle: “You shall take choice flour, and bake twelve loaves of it; two-tenths of an eph shall be in each loaf.

You shall place them in two rows, six in a row, on the table of pure gold.” (Ch. 24:5-6) Its sanctions seem harsh: “If a woman approaches any animal and has sexual relations with it, you shall kill the woman and the animal.” (Ch. 20:16) It goes against the grain of our individualism: “If any of your kin fall into difficulty and become dependent on you, you shall support them.” (Ch. 25:35) And in some places the Code seems totally irrelevant to life in the twentieth century: “You shall not sow your field with two kinds of seed; nor shall you put on a garment made of two different materials.” (Ch. 19:19)

Yet the Holiness Code contains some of the most advanced ethical ideas known to humankind: “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” (Ch. 19:18) “You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor.” (v. 15) “The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you.” (v. 34a)

And all who love liberty must salute the concept of the Jubilee Year, which is set forth in Ch. 25:8-55. Every fiftieth year is to be a Jubilee, in which slaves are released, land reverts to its ancestral owners, and—in the words inscribed on the famous bell in Philadelphia—“You shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants.” (v. 10. Special attention will be given to the idea of the Jubilee Year in the discussion of the fifth petition.)

In light of its diversity, it is best that we recognize the Holiness Code for what it is—an editorial marvel. It represents the attempt on the part of one or more persons to bring together in a single document a comprehensive expression of God’s will for Israel. Collections tend to be eclectic; the Code is no exception. It is a mixture of particulars and generalities, of trivialities and essentials, of oversights and insights. Even if we obeyed every stipulation of the Code, we would still have to ask:

What more, O Lord, do you require of us?

And yet Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount: “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have not come to abolish but to fulfill.” (Matthew 5:17) We may neither set aside the Holiness Code nor undertake to do our own, idiosyncratic interpretation. Rather we let Jesus be our instructor. For in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus is represented as taking the laws of the Hebrew Scriptures and seeing a new depth in them. For example: Leviticus 20:10 reads, “If a man commits adultery with the wife of his neighbor, both the adulterer and the adulteress shall be put to death.” But Jesus teaches, “Everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.” (Matthew 5:27) Adultery is not only the physical act of infidelity; it is also lusting for the spouse of another. The Holiness Code reads, “You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor

as yourself.” (Leviticus 19:18) But Jesus teaches, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” (Matthew 5:44). When refracted through the prism of Jesus’ teaching, the Code takes on quite a different coloration.

## **The Code and the Sermon**

We have already noted that an unknown editor or editors made the collection we have called, “The Holiness Code.” In a similar way the author of Matthew’s Gospel pulled together a collection of Jesus’ teachings into the Sermon on the Mount. Turn to **Matthew 5-7** and notice the major divisions of the Sermon.

A comprehensive study of both literary works is beyond the scope of this present program. But for our purposes, it is useful to compare and contrast one chapter from each document. Get two Bibles. Open one to **Leviticus 19** and the other to **Matthew 5**. Here are some things that ought to catch your attention:

Both chapters assume familiarity with the Ten Commandments. We have already noted how many of the commandments are embedded in Leviticus 19. Note also the references to the Ten Commandments in Matthew 5.

Both passages include what we would ordinarily call moral instruction and what we would call religious instruction. Side by side in Leviticus are instructions for sacrifices, rules for gleaning at time of harvest, laws limiting the taking of vengeance, prohibitions against cheating with measurements, as well as cautions about trimming beards. In the Gospel chapter there is a paragraph about sacred oaths along with paragraphs about adultery, anger, and vengeance. Both chapters demonstrate an understanding of God’s will as encompassing all of human existence.

The summary verse of Matthew 5—and the key verse in all of the Sermon—is this: “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” (v. 48) This is Jesus’ interpretation of the verse that sets the theme of Leviticus 19: “You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.” (v.2) Both passages ground human conduct in the nature and activity of God. We are to do as God does; we are to will what God wills.

### **“Your Will be Done”**

Where does that leave us in our exploration of the Lord’s Prayer? What is it we are asking when we pray in the third petition, “Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven”? In the light of the Code and the Sermon, it would seem that we are asking for at least three things:

First of all, we are asking that God make this world the theater of divine glory. We are asking that the earth mirror the perfections of heaven. We are pleading that the divine intentions be carried out within and throughout the universe that God has created—as well as in the heavenly realm. Both the Code and the Sermon have to do with life on this earth; neither allows for a division of things into the sacred and the secular, in which the latter would somehow be removed from God's will or purpose. We are asking that our work as well as our worship, our sexual life as well as our prayer life, be incorporated into God's enterprise.

Second, we are requesting that we be more than spectators of God's dramatic activity. We are asking that God exercise the divine purpose in and through us. This is an admission on our part that we are incapable, on our own, of making God's purpose our purpose and of carrying through with it. So we ask that God do for us what we cannot do of and by ourselves. In the same breath with which we acknowledge God's will, we confess that we cannot will it.

Possibly no one in recent memory tried harder to do the will of the heavenly Father than the young Frenchwoman, Simone Weil. She wrote in *Gravity and Grace* (Putnam, 1952, p. 45):

All the natural movements of the soul are controlled by laws analogous to those of physical gravity. Grace is the only exception.

We must always expect things to happen in conformity with the laws of gravity, unless there is supernatural intervention...

What is the reason that as soon as one human being shows he needs another (no matter whether his need be slight or great) the latter draws back from him?

However one chooses to name it—gravity, sin, egocentrism, selfishness—there is something that keeps us from doing God's will. And so we pray for what Weil calls "supernatural intervention." We pray that God will do in us and through us what we cannot do by ourselves.

In a penetrating critique of Marxists, Weil remarked that they make the mistake of thinking that one can mount up into the air by moving forward. And the same might be said of our efforts to do God's will on earth: We cannot reach heavenly heights of purity and righteousness by moving forward, no matter how much effort we expend. We are not like airplanes, which if they move forward at a sufficient speed, become airborne. All the good will and effort in the world will not get us off the ground. Certainly we may both know and do God's will. But we cannot will to do it. And so we ask God to do what we cannot.

There is, of course, a third dimension to our asking, "Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." And that is submitting our wills and intentions to the overreaching, hidden sovereignty of God. Remember Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemene, on the night before his execution, wrestling with God in prayer. Like any mortal, Jesus did not want to die. He knew his own heart. And he knew what was in the hearts of others. He did not doubt what waited for him on the morrow. And yet he prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want." (Matthew 26:39) And when we pray that God's will be done, we are bending our purposes to a purpose greater than ours.

This bowing to the greater wisdom and purpose of God is not a kind of fatalism, in which everything that happens is accepted as God's special will for us as individuals. There is nothing here of bullets with our names on them or of appointed times for us to die or that sort of thing. Rather, as Simone Weil wrote in *The Need for Roots* (Putnam, 1952, p. 289):

[A]ll that happens to us throughout the course of our life, having been brought about by the total obedience of the universe to God, places us in contact with the absolute good formed by the divine will; in virtue of this, everything without exception, joys and sorrows alike, ought to be welcomed with the same inward attitude of love and thankfulness.

## **The Descent of Grace**

What shall we think of, then, when we pray "Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven"? What metaphor, what image encompasses all that we have attributed to this petition?

In the desert country of the American Southwest are arroyos. These are riverbeds where the water runs only at certain times of the year or during sudden, extreme thunderstorms. It is not uncommon on a blistering hot summer day, when the sun is shining overhead, to hear a sudden roar and see a wall of muddy water pouring down an arroyo. There can be a thunderstorm in the mountains, several miles away, which the unsuspecting tourist knows nothing about. The sudden rush of water seems to her or him almost miraculous. Arroyos are graphic reminders of what once happened and equally graphic promises of what may yet happen—at any moment.

When we pray, "Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven," we might imagine ourselves to be farmers in the Southwest, who have planted our corn and dug our irrigation ditches and now ask God to send the necessary water. The arroyos remind us that water has flowed here in the past; we can see by the sere vegetation that the land

cries out for water; we know that sometime in the future, life-giving water will flow here again. **But why not right now?** We need a sudden rush from heaven, a descent of grace—not that we shall be overpowered and swept away, but that we shall be made fruitful.

## **Biblical Spirituality**

In Chapter One we saw that biblical spirituality steers between contemporary spiritualities of self-actualization and self-effacement. In the previous chapter we determined that biblical spirituality avoided both optimism and pessimism. In this session we see that a spirituality grounded in Scripture finds a way between fatalism and heroism.

By this we mean that biblical spirituality avoids the passive resignation of those spiritualities that deny to human beings any capacity for doing the will of God. It avoids also the stance of “muscular Christianity,” which exhorts the believer to “pull up his or her socks and get on with the good life.”

There used to be a popular saying that a Christian ought to pray like a Presbyterian and work like a Methodist. That is a somewhat coarse way of describing the path between fatalism and heroism. According to the conventional wisdom of a prior generation, Presbyterians believed in the absolute sovereignty of God, while Methodists believed in human perfectibility. Biblical spirituality is neither as passive as those fictional Presbyterians nor as aggressively active as those fictional Methodists.

Truth wears no denominational label. I was once a guest at a regional meeting of the Society of Friends. In the service of worship an elderly Friend spoke at some length about the gifts of the Spirit, how unpredictable they are. “The Spirit is like the wind,” he said. “We need to wait upon God’s Spirit for inspiration and guidance.” The economist Kenneth Boulding was present at that Friends’ Meeting. And when the elderly Friend had finished his speech, Boulding got to his feet. In somewhat “unFriendly” impatience he said tersely: “The Spirit is the wind. But the church is the windmill. We had better keep it greased.”

## **Pressing Questions**

This discussion of the will of God may have left you wondering, “How can I discover God’s will for my life and do it?” If that is your question, you are in good company. Every true saint has asked that also. The biographies of notable Christians reveal that each of them struggled for willing obedience. You don’t have to read a shelf of books to discover that. Our forebears in the faith have left us poems that reveal their quest for



God's will. In most denominational hymnals there is a list of the authors of hymn texts. One such hymnal has hymns (poems) by Bernard of Clairvaux, Ambrose of Milan, Thomas Aquinas, Elizabeth Burrows, John Calvin, Thomas á Kempis, Martin Luther, Francis of Assisi, Georgia Harkness, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Jennette Threlfall, and Charles Wesley. You will find it profitable to search your denominational hymnal for poems by such as these. Calvin's "I Greet Thee, Who My Sure Redeemer Art," and Charles Wesley's "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling," show how these believers found a way between fatalism and heroism.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's name appears in that list of hymn writers. He was a Christian pastor and theologian in Germany during the time of Hitler. Early on he saw the idolatry of Nazism. He organized an underground seminary; he joined a conspiracy to eliminate Hitler, for which he was arrested and hanged. As much as any Christian of his time, Bonhoeffer sought to know and do God's will. Read a biography of Bonhoeffer. Better still, read his books: *The Cost of Discipleship* (MacMillan, 1963), *Life Together* (SCM, 1954), and *Letters and Papers from Prison* (MacMillan, 1953).

Mention has been made several times in these pages of Simone Weil. She went to extraordinary lengths to do what she saw to be God's will. She was active in politics in France during the decade before the Second World War. She left her post as a teacher of philosophy to work in an automobile factory; she wanted to share the lot of ordinary working people. She went to Spain to join the resistance to Fascism. During World War II, while living in England and working for the liberation of France, she would eat no more than the average French peasant. Her writings are not easy, though greatly rewarding. She is most accessible through *Simone Weil: A Modern Pilgrimage*, by the psychiatrist Robert Coles (Addison-Wesley, 1987).

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## **For Further Study and Reflection**

### **Memory Bank**

1. Leviticus 19:2, 18.
2. Matthew 5:17, 48; 26:39.

### **Research**

1. Study one or more of the following passages meditatively: Matthew 5:3-16; Matthew 22:37-39; 1 Corinthians 13. On the basis of your study, write an answer to the question, "By what guidelines does a Christian live?"

2. Analyze the hymn, "Take My Life, and Let It Be Consecrated." How are the various aspects of personality to be committed to God? How does this, in your opinion, add up to total commitment? One stanza begins, "Take my will and make it thine; it shall be no longer mine." In what ways do you see this expressing the meaning of "Your will be done"?

### **Reflection**

1. From time to time in education there have been emphases on "character education" and on "moral and spiritual values" as guides to personal and social life. How do you define "character"? What values do you single out as "moral and spiritual"? If we take "the will of God" into consideration, what changes will we make in what we mean by "character" and "moral and spiritual values"?
2. Micah 6:8 is often cited as epitomizing the will of God. If we take this into account as we pray, "Your will be done" what do you see as some of the specific changes in personal attitudes and actions, and social and world relationships, to which we are committing ourselves?
3. Compose a short prayer that, in your own terms, expresses the meaning of "Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven."