

Not Too Hard

Deuteronomy 30:11-20; Psalm 75; Luke 10:25-37



Understanding God's will is a common concern. There are many who struggle to determine God's will for their lives. In part the concern is justified as we often must restrain our own will to follow God's. On the other hand, it is not that hard to understand what God wants of us. Sometimes we make discovery of God's will out to be a lot more complicated than it really is. Perhaps, we don't really struggle with discerning God's will. Is not our struggle more about fulfilling God's will and being patient about the future?

Nearing the end of his ministry, Moses was concerned about the level of the people's faith. He was concerned that they would fall away from *Yahweh*. Moses reminded the people that God's instructions were not that difficult to understand. They were not really complicated. The essence of God's instruction could be summarized in a song which he taught to the nation. Moses was not so concerned, however, with their understanding of God's instruction. His concern was how well the people would follow God's ways and how long they would remain faithful.

Moses' words here at the end of Deuteronomy sound perhaps a little strange. They speak of the nearness of God's message. They speak of the clarity and simplicity of God's instructions. They speak of the accessibility of God's directions, will, and presence. It has been said that we tend to get hung up on the simple things by expecting them to be more complicated. To a great degree, that is what Moses seems to have worried with here. The people knew God's will and instructions. They knew what they needed to do. They were just uncomfortable with it. It was too simple, so they complicated matters.

Life had to be more complicated than just trusting God to meet their needs, didn't it? Serve God and love those around you—how would that keep food on the table? How would serving God faithfully ensure rain for the crops, the fertility of their flocks, and protection from their enemies? *Yahweh* was asking them to let go of their plans and concerns for their future and trust God instead. It was too easy. It did not give them control. They were too anxious to trust God that much.

The scribe in Luke 10 questioned Jesus about how to inherit eternal life. It was likely posed as a trick question. The issue was supposed to be complicated. The Jews had 613 rules by which they were to live in order to fulfill the demands of the law. They had searched the Pentateuch to find the 613 commands. They had memorized them, organized them, categorized them, and developed for them a series of interpretations. Many figured that if one were to manage to keep over half of them, their standing before God would be safe. They knew, however, that this was no easy task. Keeping even 307 commandments without failure was a daunting task. They devised various approaches to aid people in accomplishing the impossible. They knew that they would never be able to keep the commandments in their entirety. They were diligent, however, to determine how they might secure their standing before God amid the enormous difficulty of meeting God's standards.

Under Nazi regime, Jews consulted their rabbis about whether it was legitimate for them to take items left behind by neighbors who had been shipped to concentration camps. They needed to feed their families and could alleviate their circumstances by taking the items. There was concern, however, over whether this might be a form of stealing, and therefore might incur disfavor with God. This was no light

concern in their eyes. It was serious consideration of their responsibility to live in accordance with God's will and instruction, even in the face of the horrendous conditions of the holocaust.

We may find it easy to criticize what we understand as the excesses of Judaic legalism in Jesus' day. In so doing, perhaps we overlook too quickly the earnestness with which they lived out their faith. The earnest zeal of the lawyer in this passage was in no way criticized by Jesus. Jesus' interest was to clarify and simplify God's instruction with an understanding of grace.

We are given no reason as to why the priest and Levite passed the injured man by, though it would seem natural they would worry over personal safety. Jesus is not concerned to rationalize their decisions. He just points to the fact that they did not offer aid. They are not restricted due to ritual purity laws, for they are leaving Jerusalem, not heading toward the Temple. If anything, they are explicitly breaking the commandments by their failure to help the wounded man. This is no critique of priests and Levites in general, simply a possible scenario we are called to ponder. Just like the lawyer, the priest and Levite know the demands of the law and the requirement to meet the needs of one in distress. We are simply pointed to their failure to fulfill their responsibility toward this man in the ditch.

The story moves on to the arrival of one who would be unexpected as a source of aid. It is from this unexpected quarter that help arrives. Along with the Samaritan, we find a new element in the story—compassion. Hope arrives in this man's ability to see life from the perspective of the one lying in distress. As Nolland points out in his commentary, "It is from the perspective of the ditch where one lies helpless and battered, and in desperate need of help, that one should reflect upon the question 'who is my neighbor?' Then one will know how wide the reach of neighbor love should extend when one is in a position to be handing out favors."¹ As best we can tell, the priest and Levite simply failed to picture themselves in the fallen man's condition. They knew what to do. They just failed to do it. There was no failure of understanding, but a failure of compassion.

That was Jesus' point in the earlier discussion. The man questioning about how to inherit eternal life had the answer. He knew what he needed to do. He had read and studied the Scriptures, and he even added a phrase to the Biblical mandate he quoted, underscoring the importance of loving God with all one's mind. He had used his energies to recognize the essence of responsibility before God. Now he just needed to live what he knew. Instead of doing, he was enmeshed in worrying over limiting the term "neighbor."

Perhaps that is where we find ourselves, as well. We know the stories. We understand the essence of God's will for our lives. We recognize the demands of the gospel and the need to share God's love, blessing, grace, and mercy with the entire world around us. Knowing and doing, however, are two separate things. Until we live what we claim to know, our knowledge is worthless. Understanding God's will is not too hard, is it? Trusting God to be faithful is much harder than recognizing God's will. Then again, that places the focus upon our own failure, doesn't it? Perhaps we could trust God with our failures as well. Is that really too hard?

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¹ Nolland, John. *Vol. 35B, Word Biblical Commentary : Luke 9:21-18:34*. electronic ed. Logos Library System; Word Biblical Commentary. Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998.