

The Word of Righteousness

Knowing and Doing the Will of God

Making known to us the mystery of His will according to His good pleasure, which He purposed in Himself, unto the economy of the fullness of the times, to head up all things in Christ, the things in the heavens and the things on the earth, in Him; in whom also we were designated as an inheritance, having been predestinated according to the purpose of the One who works all things according to the counsel of His will. (Eph. 1:9-11)

To enlighten all that they may see what the economy of the mystery is, which throughout the ages has been hidden in God, who created all things, in order that now to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenlies the multifarious wisdom of God might be made known through the church, according to the eternal purpose which He made in Christ Jesus our Lord. (3:9-11)

These verses speak of God's will, His eternal purpose, His good pleasure, His counsel, and His economy. Since God has made known to us the mystery of His will, we who have received this revelation must be governed by it and have a living and service to God that operate practically for the carrying out of God's will. When the Lord Jesus returns, He will judge His slaves based on their relationship to His will (Luke 12:47-48). It is this latter point that we will emphasize in this article, since we seek to examine the truth of God's will in the light of the word of righteousness regarding our accountability to God and our reward or loss at His judgment seat (Heb. 5:13; 2 Cor. 5:10).

God's Will, Purpose, Good Pleasure, Counsel, and Economy

God's will (θέλημα in the New Testament, or more rarely, βούλημα) is God's wish, desire, inclination, intention, determined resolve, and deliberate design (Thayer 285; Vine 676). Simply stated, it is what God wishes to do. God's will is eternal, being determined in eternity past (Eph. 1:5, 9). In time all things were created because of God's will (Rev. 4:11), and in this age God seeks for His will to be carried out on earth, as it is done in heaven (Matt. 6:10). God's will is centered on Christ, it issues in the church as the Body of Christ, and it consummates in the New Jerusalem for eternity. God's will is not firstly related to the minor points of our daily living and needs.

Rather, it is altogether related to God's desire and need. Thus, it is universal, great, eternal, and perfect.

God's purpose (πρόθεσις) is the setting forth of His intention, placing it in view before Him (Thayer 539). God's purpose is eternal in time, extent, and scope. It is the plan of God made in eternity past and is altogether related to the expression, the revelation, of His multifarious wisdom to the rulers and authorities in the heavenlies through the church (Eph. 3:9-11). We were predestinated and selected according to God's purpose (1:11; Rom. 9:11), and all things work together for good to those who are called according to the purposeful determination of His plan to produce many brothers of His firstborn Son (8:28-29).

God's will is according to His good pleasure (Eph. 1:9). His pleasure (εὐδοκία) is His good will, kindly intent, delight, and satisfaction. It is what He takes pleasure in, what He is favorably inclined toward, and what He directs His mind and turns His thoughts to (Thayer 258). In short, it is what God likes, what makes Him happy. God delights in Christ (εὐδοκέω; Matt. 3:17), and His thoughts and mind are turned to the church as His expression (Eph. 5:25-27). That God's good pleasure was purposed in Himself indicates that His pleasure is embodied in both His will and His purpose.

According to God's purpose, He works all things according to the counsel of His will (1:11). God's counsel (βουλή) is His advice, the result of His determination (as distinguished from γνώμη, the result of knowledge, Vine 16). God's will is His intention; God's counsel is His consideration of the way to accomplish His will or intention. Acts 2:23 tells us that Christ was delivered up and crucified by the "determined counsel and foreknowledge of God." This indicates that in eternity past the Triune God had a meeting, a council among the three of the Godhead. The decision and resolution made by this council are God's counsel. Thus, the crucifixion of Christ was not an accident in human history but a purposeful fulfillment of the divine counsel determined by the Triune God. Genesis 1:26 says, "Let Us make man." This shows that the creation of man was also according to the counsel among the three of the Godhead. Paul's ministry was to declare all the counsel of God, which he did not shrink

from doing (Acts 20:27). Based on this, we may say that the counsel of God is the contents of the entire divine plan (Thayer 105).

After speaking of the mystery of God's will, His good pleasure, and His purpose, Paul says, "Unto the economy of the fullness of the times, to head up all things in Christ" (Eph. 1:10). God's economy (οἰκονομία; 1 Tim. 1:4) is God's dispensation, plan, arrangement, of the mystery His will. What God wanted in eternity past was hidden in God as a mystery. Based upon that mystery, God made an arrangement, and that arrangement is His economy. The entire Bible reveals to us the economy of God, which is what God intends to do, what God intends to give us, and what God intends to work into us (Lee, *Central* 35). The intention of God's economy is to dispense Himself into His chosen people, making Himself one with them, and making them one with Him. As a result of this dispensing, God is enlarged and expanded in His expression so that all His divine attributes are expressed in human virtues for His glorification in the church and in Christ Jesus in this age, in the age to come, and for eternity (Eph. 1:22-23; 3:21).

All our living and being must be one with God for His great will, purpose, good pleasure, counsel, and economy. Our intention and resolve must be one with God's will; His purpose must be constantly set before us, as it is before Him; we must delight in His intention, as He does; we must know and declare the counsel of His will and allow Him to operate all things according to His counsel; and we must be one with His economy so that He can be dispensed continually into us. Then we will be men of His will, who will be rewarded by the Lord Jesus at His return, not only outwardly but even the more by what we have become according to His perfect and eternal design.

God's Will Being Centered on Christ

Two books of the New Testament—Colossians and Ephesians—are particularly crucial in revealing the great, eternal will of God. Colossians reveals what God's will is according to His desire and intention in the whole universe, in creation, in redemption, in the coming age, and in eternity. In 1:9 Paul says, "We also, since the day we heard of it, do not cease praying and asking on your behalf that you may be filled with the full knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding." Similarly, in 4:12 Paul says, "Epaphras, who is one of you, a slave of Christ Jesus, greets you, always struggling on your behalf in his prayers that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God." In this way Colossians both begins and ends with a word concerning God's will. Paul's thought here concerning the will of God can be understood only in the light of the subject and central purpose of this book. The subject of the book

of Colossians is Christ as the all-inclusive One, having the first place in all things as the mystery and embodiment of God (1:15, 18; 2:2, 9), as the Head and constituent of the church (3:10-11), as the allotted portion, life, constituent, and hope of the saints (1:12; 3:4; 1:27), and as the body of all positive things (2:16-17; Lee, *Recovery Version* 663). Thus, God's will in this Epistle is His will regarding His economy concerning Christ, not His will regarding minor things. The will of God is concentrated in Christ and is for Christ; Christ is everything in the will of God (Lee, *Sketch* 222).

God has made the mystery of His will known to us through His revelation in Christ, that is, through Christ's incarnation, crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension (Lee, *Ephesians* 68). In Christ's incarnation we see God's desire to make Himself one with man, to mingle divinity with humanity to produce the God-man with both the divine and human life and nature. Christ's crucifixion fully reveals God's intention not only to redeem fallen mankind but also to terminate the old man of the old creation so that a corporate new man may be germinated in resurrection. In Christ's resurrection we see God's purpose to regenerate those whom He has predestinated so that He might produce them as the many sons of God and brothers of Christ, the firstborn Son. The resurrection also reveals God's economy in being transfigured to be the life-giving Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45), the consummated Spirit of the processed and consummated Triune God, so that He may indwell, transform, and saturate the regenerated believers, ultimately making them the same as He is in life and in nature but not in the Godhead. Finally, in Christ's ascension we see His economy in His enthronement and in His descension to produce the church as His Body. Once again we must conclude that God's will is altogether related to the person and work of Christ, who is the focus of God's great plan.

The will of God is profound in relation to our knowing, experiencing, and living the all-inclusive Christ (Lee, *Colossians* 20-21, 41-43). Christ is the all-inclusive, all-extensive One, who is God, man, and the reality of every positive thing in the universe. He is the preeminent One, the One who has the first place in all things, both in the old creation and the new creation. He is also the centrality and universality, the center and circumference, the hub and the rim, of God's economy (Col. 1:15-27). Verse 19 says, "In Him all the fullness was pleased to dwell." *Fullness* here denotes the overflowing expression of all the riches that God is. All the expression of the rich being of God, both in creation and in the church, is pleased, happy, to dwell in Christ.

Moreover, God's intention in His economy is to work the wonderful, all-inclusive Christ into our being as our life and our everything so that we may become the corporate

expression of the Triune God. The Colossians were distracted, misled, and defrauded from Christ by Gnosticism, mysticism, asceticism, and religious observances and ordinances. This Epistle reveals that God's will for the distracted Colossians was that they would know Christ, experience Christ, enjoy Christ, live Christ, and have Christ as their life and their person. Thus, Paul prayed that they would be filled with the full knowledge of God's will so that the all-inclusive Christ would be their real and practical portion. Today we also must learn to know Christ, live Him, take Him, experience Him, and realize Him. We must know that the Father delights in the Son, who is the center and focus of God's will, and we must give Christ the first place in all our being and the opportunity to be everything to us and in us. In this way we will know the will of God and live genuinely and practically in the carrying out of God's will on the earth.

God's Will to Have a Corporate Expression of Himself

Like Colossians, Ephesians is crucial in revealing the contents of God's eternal and perfect will. Again, Paul speaks of God's will from the beginning of the book to the final chapter. Ephesians 1:5 says, "Predestinating us unto sonship through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the good pleasure of His will." Verses 9 and 11 continue, "Making known to us the mystery of His will according to His good pleasure, which He purposed in Himself... according to the purpose of the One who works all things according to the counsel of His will." Concerning the living needed in the believers' daily walk, Paul exhorts, "Do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is" (5:17), and "Doing the will of God from the soul" (6:6). As is the case with Colossians, we can understand Paul's revelation and exhortations concerning the will of God in Ephesians only by seeing the subject of this book. The subject of Ephesians is the church—the mystery of Christ, the Body of Christ as the fullness of Christ, becoming the fullness of God (Lee, *Recovery Version* 608).

In chapter 1 the believers are predestinated unto sonship according to the good pleasure embodied in God's will. It was God's good pleasure to predestinate us unto, that is, for and with a view to, our becoming His sons, who constitute the church as Christ's Body, the fullness of the One who fills all in all (vv. 22-23). As the issue of the incarnated, crucified, resurrected, and ascended Christ, who is transmitted to the church, the Body of Christ becomes an organism constituted of all the regenerated believers for the expression and activities of the Head. Such a Body is the fullness of Christ, His overflowing expression that issues from the enjoyment of His riches.

In chapter 2 the church is composed of those who are

saved by grace, raised up together with Christ, and seated in the heavenly places in Christ in order to become a display of the surpassing riches and grace in Christ Jesus (vv. 5-7). These saved ones are the masterpiece of God, who have been brought near to God and all His blessings and made one through the cross of Christ to be one corporate new man (vv. 8, 10, 13-15). Such a corporate entity is built upon Christ as the cornerstone, upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, as the building of God, a holy temple in the Lord (vv. 20-22).

Verse 9 in chapter 1 speaks of "the mystery of His will." In eternity God planned a will, which henceforth was hidden in Him. Then in chapter 3 Paul says,

By revelation the mystery was made known to me, as I have written previously in brief, by which, in reading it, you can perceive my understanding in the mystery of Christ, which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men, as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in spirit. (vv. 3-5)

God's will as a mystery in Him issues in God's economy. Verses 9 through 11 continue,

To enlighten all that they may see what the economy of the mystery is, which throughout the ages has been hidden in God, who created all things, in order that now to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenlies the multifarious wisdom of God might be made known through the church, according to the eternal purpose which He made in Christ Jesus our Lord.

According to the purpose of God, the intention set forth according to His will, the church becomes the universal, eternal manifestation and display of the wisdom of God by being filled with the superabundant riches of Christ in the experience of the saints unto, resulting in, all the fullness of God for His eternal glory in the church and in Christ Jesus (vv. 16, 19-21).

In chapters 4 through 6 the believers carry out in a practical way the living and responsibility needed for the church in oneness with the Triune God (4:4-6) to become a corporate, full-grown, built-up man by putting on the new man and being filled in spirit (vv. 13, 16, 24; 5:18). Such a built-up church becomes the bride of Christ for the pleasure of Christ, the loving Bridegroom (vv. 25, 31-32), and the corporate warrior to deal with the spiritual enemy (6:10-20). The foregoing, brief review of Ephesians shows the view from the heavens concerning the will, purpose, good pleasure, counsel, and economy of God, which is to have the church as the Body of Christ, His fullness, the new man, the temple of God, the fullness of God, the bride, and the warrior. The determination, heart's desire, and inner feeling of Christ toward the

church, as seen especially in Ephesians, is expressed in the following stanza:

The church is Christ's deep longing
And His good pleasure too.
His every word and action
Is made with her in view.
His heart's love is established,
And nought can Him deter;
Before the earth's foundation
His thoughts were filled with her. (*Hymns*, #1229)

Only by seeing the vision of the church can we understand what the will of God is and have the way to live practically according to His wish, desire, inclination, and deliberate design.

Knowing and Doing the Will of God

Luke 12:47 and 48 speak of the need of the believers, as the slaves of the Master, both to know God's will and to do according to His will. As we have seen, Ephesians 1:9 tells us that God has made known to us the mystery of His will. We have been appointed to know the will of God (Acts 22:14), and God willed to make known to us what the riches of the glory of His mystery in Christ are (Col. 1:27). In 1:9 Paul says that he did not cease praying and asking that the believers would be filled with the full knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding. Wisdom is in our spirit and is for us to perceive God's eternal will; spiritual understanding is in our mind, renewed by the Spirit (Eph. 4:23), and is for us to understand and interpret what we perceive in our spirit. As the Lord's slaves, we need to understand practically what the will of the Lord is (5:17). To understand the will of the Lord is the best way to redeem our time in our daily walk (v. 16). Proverbs 29:18 tells us, "Where there is no vision, the people cast off restraint." Without a governing vision and practical understanding of the will of the Lord, the people of God miss the mark of His economy and cause much waste in their daily life, work, and service and even in their pursuit of the Lord Himself.

Based on our revelation and understanding of God's will, we must also have a living and service that match God's great purpose concerning Christ and the church. After speaking of being filled with the full knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, Paul charges us "to walk worthily of the Lord to please Him in all things, bearing fruit in every good work and growing by the full knowledge of God" (Col. 1:10). Walking worthily of the Lord issues from having the full knowledge of God's will. Such a worthy walk is a walk in which we live Christ, grow Christ, express Christ, and propagate Christ in every respect. Christ is the will of God, and He should also be our walk. If we know that God's will is for us to

be saturated with Christ, to take Christ as our life and our person, and to live Christ, spontaneously our walk will be worthy of the Lord. In Galatians 1:15 and 16 Paul tells us that it pleased God to reveal Christ, the Son, in him. Nothing is more pleasing to God the Father than for us to live Christ (Lee, *Colossians* 21-22). To have this manner of life is the real essence of every Christian good work.

James, in his characteristic way, exhorts us to walk in the will of God. He says, "Come now, you who say, Today or tomorrow we will go into this or that city and spend a year there and do business and make a profit...Instead you ought to say, If the Lord wills, we will both live and do this or that" (4:13, 15). Here James sets forth the principle of seeking and doing the will of God in all our practical decisions and living. However, it is not James's portion in the New Testament ministry to provide the details of how such a daily life should be composed. Paul speaks more clearly of this in Romans 8. Verses 4 through 6 say,

That the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the spirit. For those who are according to the flesh mind the things of the flesh; but those who are according to the spirit, the things of the Spirit. For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the spirit is life and peace.

In the light of Paul's higher revelation, to "do this or that" in the will of God is to walk according to the spirit—the divine Spirit indwelling and mingled with our regenerated human spirit—and set our mind on the spirit in everything we do. If we are married, we must be married in the will of God, that is, in Christ as the indwelling Spirit. If we do business, we must do it in God's will, and if we serve the Lord, we must do this also in Christ as God's will.

To know and to do the will of God is also to live in the church in a practical way. In 12:2 Paul tells us, "Do not be fashioned according to this age, but be transformed by the renewing of the mind that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and well pleasing and perfect." Following this, Paul goes on to speak of the measure, function, gifts, and services of the members of the Body of Christ. Verses 3 through 5 continue,

For I say, through the grace given to me, to everyone who is among you, not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think, but to think so as to be sober-minded, as God has apportioned to each a measure of faith. For just as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, so we who are many are one Body in Christ, and individually members one of another.

Paul's word clearly indicates that in Romans 12 the will of God is that we—whom God has chosen, called, redeemed, justified, sanctified, and conformed unto glorification in the preceding eleven chapters—may be members one of another to have the living of the Body of Christ. Thus, to live in the will of God is to live and function properly in the practical church life. It was through the will of God according to His economy concerning the church that Paul was appointed an apostle and served among the saints (1:10; 1 Cor. 1:1; 2 Cor. 1:1; Eph. 1:1; Col. 1:1; 2 Tim. 1:1), and it is through the will of God that we, the many members, were predestined unto sonship for the constitution of the church, are sanctified to live a holy life for the church life (1 Thes. 4:3), live a rejoicing, praying, and thanking life in the daily church life (5:16-18), continue steadfastly in the teaching and fellowship of the apostles (Acts 2:42; 2 Cor. 8:4-5), and suffer and comport ourselves for the corporate testimony of Christ in the church (1 Pet. 2:12, 15; 3:15, 17). Moreover, the Spirit operates as He purposes in the members of the Body to distribute gifts for the building up of the church, and God places the members in the Body even as He wills (1 Cor. 12:11, 18; 14:26). It is clear, then, that the genuine and practical way to do the will of God—His wish, desire, inclination, and deliberate design—is to live and walk in the church life for the building up of the Body of Christ.

Doing the Will of the Father to Enter into the Kingdom of the Heavens

In Matthew 12:50 the Lord Jesus said, "Whoever does the will of My Father who is in the heavens, he is My brother and sister and mother." This word of the Lord strongly indicates that doing the will of the Father is a requirement and prerequisite for those who would have the Lord identify Himself with them. It is those who do the will of His Father that are His brothers who help Him, His sisters who sympathize with Him, and His mothers who tenderly love Him. In 7:21-23 Jesus said most clearly,

Not everyone who says to Me, Lord, Lord, will enter into the kingdom of the heavens, but he who does the will of My Father who is in the heavens. Many will say to Me in that day, Lord, Lord, was it not in Your name that we prophesied, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name did many works of power? And then I will declare to them: I never knew you. Depart from Me, you workers of lawlessness.

The people in this passage all refer to the Lord as "Lord," indicating that they know Him and have received Him as their Lord by calling upon His name (Rom. 10:13). However, the Lord makes a distinction between those disciples who can enter the kingdom of the heavens—particularly into its manifestation in the

coming age as a reward to the overcoming believers—and those who cannot. Watchman Nee writes,

The Lord clearly shows us here that the condition for entering the kingdom of the heavens is doing the will of God. Although some have been saved and have called Him Lord, and although they have also done some works, without doing the will of God they nevertheless cannot enter into the kingdom of the heavens. The reward of the kingdom of the heavens is based on the obedience of man. If one is not faithful while living on the earth, though he will not lose eternal life, he will lose the kingdom of the heavens. When the time comes for the heavens to rule, that is, when the Lord Jesus comes the second time, some will not be able to enter the kingdom, but will lose it instead...

The Lord Jesus said that they should not call Him Lord with their mouth only. If they call Him Lord, they should do the will of the Father. Even if they have the outward works of prophesying, casting out demons, and doing works of power, these works must not replace the Father's will...We must remember that we should not only call Him Lord with our mouth, but we should do the Father's will in our walk as well. (404-405)

To enter into the kingdom of the heavens, we need to do two things. We need to call on the Lord and also do the will of the heavenly Father. To call on the Lord suffices for us to be saved, but to enter into the kingdom of the heavens, we also need to do the will of the heavenly Father. Hence, not everyone who says, "Lord, Lord," will enter into the kingdom of the heavens; only those who call on the Lord and do the will of the Father will enter in. Since entering into the kingdom of the heavens requires doing the will of the heavenly Father, it is clearly different from entering into the kingdom of God through regeneration (John 3:3, 5). The latter entrance is gained through being born of the divine life; the former, through the living of that life (Recovery Version, Matt. 7:21, note 1). To enter into the kingdom of the heavens in Matthew is equivalent to being bountifully supplied a rich entrance into the kingdom through the growth and development of the divine virtues within us, by the divine life, as spoken of in 2 Peter 1:5-11. It is a reward to the believers who diligently seek the growth in life and live this life in a practical way for the building up of the church as the Body of Christ.

Preparing and Doing according to the Will of God

Luke 12:35 through 48 is another important passage regarding the necessity of doing the Father's will in the light of the believers' judgment at the Lord's second coming. In verse 36 Jesus exhorted the disciples to be like men waiting for their own master when he returns from

the wedding feast. This simile sets the principle for the subsequent parable—the Lord is the coming Master, and the redeemed, called, and regenerated disciples are those waiting for Him. In verses 42 through 48 Jesus said,

Who then is the faithful and prudent steward, whom the master will set over his service to give them their portion of food at the proper time? Blessed is that slave whom his master, when he comes, will find so doing. Truly I tell you that he will set him over all his possessions. But if that slave says in his heart, My master is delaying his coming, and begins to beat the male servants and the female servants and to eat and to drink and become drunk, the master of that slave will come on a day when he does not expect him and at an hour which he does not know, and will cut him asunder, and will appoint his portion with the unbelievers. And that slave who knew his master's will and did not prepare or do according to his will, will receive many lashes; but he who did not know, yet did things worthy of stripes, will receive few lashes. But to everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required from him; and to whom much has been committed, they will ask of him all the more.

When he comes in verse 43 refers to the Lord's second coming, which will transpire at the end of this age. Thus, this passage refers to the future judgment of the believers, the Lord's stewards and slaves, for their life and work in this age. If a believer is found to have done the will of God—not only occasionally but habitually and continually—he will be rewarded with the entrance into the manifestation of the kingdom of the heavens. If, however, he is judged to have passed his life not merely in ignorance but also in neglect of the will of the Father, he will receive a certain chastisement.

A Genuine Believer Who Does Not Do the Will of God

The key to seeing the full import of the foregoing passage is to identify the person of the steward, or slave, that is, to identify in particular the evil, unfaithful slave who is punished at the master's coming.¹ Charles A. Coates includes himself and his fellow ministers as coming under the principle of the slave who knew his master's will. He writes,

There is such a thing as knowing the Lord's will and not doing it. We see the principle of government here; the Lord exercises it even now...I think the Lord in His government deals out stripes where they are due. His government goes on, and I believe the Lord will not suffer in us what He suffers in some of our brethren who have less light. (165)

Apparently, Coates sees the Lord's chastisement as the ongoing and present exercise of His government in the

church today, but he does not address the eschatological interpretation of the evil servant, which is crucial to this passage. Joel B. Green takes a general attitude in identifying the evil slave. He posits that the intended audience of the Lord's word, and thus its interpretation, is purposely ambiguous, denying anyone among the crowd (v. 13) the possibility of dismissing His message as irrelevant. However, Green does better by noting that there is a definite aspect of the Lord's parable that places a "special onus" on the disciples in particular, who, like the evil slave, have received "enviable knowledge" and thus know the Master's will (10:21-24; 497, 506).

As is often the case in dealing with the passages in the New Testament that speak of the future reward and punishment of the believers, a lack of clarity in understanding and interpretation leads to confusion and contradiction. John C. Ryle begins his exposition on 12:41-48 by saying,

We learn from these verses, *the importance of doing, in our Christianity*. Our Lord is speaking of His own second coming. He is comparing His disciples to servants waiting for their master's return, who have each their own work to do during His absence...The warning has doubtless a primary reference to ministers of the Gospel. They are the stewards of God's mysteries, who are specially bound to be found "doing," when Christ comes again. But the words contain a further lesson, which all Christians would do well to consider...The lesson before us is not about justification, but about sanctification,—not about faith, but about holiness. The point is not *what a man should do to be saved*,—but *what ought a saved man to do?* (89-90)

Ryle's view seems clear and fast: The servants spoken of are not only the ministers of the gospel but also "all Christians," the justified and saved ones who are in the stage of sanctification. However, his argument quickly takes a confusing turn, as he begins to speak of the chastisement on the slave who did not do the Lord's will: "Let no man deceive us on this subject. There is a hell for such an one as goeth on still in his wickedness, no less than a heaven for the believer in Jesus" (91-92). Having just called this slave a "saved man," Ryle goes on to call him hell-bound, "unconverted," and a mere "Christian professor" (92). Within the space of a few pages Ryle seems to turn a parable about genuine, saved servants of Christ into a gospel message for the unconverted and condemned. The failure to see that the New Testament warns of a future, eschatological reward and punishment for the believers leads Christian writers into ambiguities and contradictions, such as those exhibited here by Ryle. We must understand the truth of the Bible and be faithful to it.

By the Lord's provision for His Body, some Christian

writers are bolder to acknowledge a certain coming reward or chastisement for genuine believers. As a result, these writers are willing to unambiguously identify the evil slave in chapter 12 as a *bona fide* servant of Christ. John Peter Lange goes as far as to say that the slave who knew his master's will but did not do it is an "unfaithful apostle, shepherd, and teacher" (205). He writes,

Here the thought comes especially into prominence, that the Lord will judge His servants according to the condition in which He finds them, and that no earlier manifested faithfulness can deliver them if they afterwards, in view of the delay of the Parusia [sic], shall fall into negligence and unfaithfulness. (205)

Concerning those who did not know the will of the master, Lange continues,

For if even the heathen, according to Rom. ii.15, have [the work of the law written in their hearts], so that they are not to be excused, how much less can the servant of Christ reckon upon entire exemption from punishment if he in some particular case did not know the will of the Lord. (206)

Lange clearly identifies the evil slave of both kinds—the one who knew the master's will and the one who did not—as a servant of Christ (as opposed to a "heathen"), perhaps even a gifted servant—an apostle, shepherd, or teacher. Such persons are the "true citizens of the kingdom" (206). Frederic Godet speaks similarly, seeing the object of Jesus' parable as "an apostle or an unfaithful minister under the image of an unprincipled steward" (108). Godet sees the slave who knew the will of the Lord as being a gifted member given to the Body, in the principle of Ephesians 4:11. He writes,

"He gave some as...pastors and teachers." It is Jesus who will have this ministry, who has established it by His mandatories, who procures for His Church in every age those who have a mission to fill it, and who endows them for that end. Hence their weightier responsibility. (108)

Godet paraphrases the words of Jesus to Peter in Luke 12: "All should watch, for all shall share in the Master's personal requital (ver. 37); but very specially (περισσότερον ["all the more"], ver. 48) ye, my apostles, who have to expect either a greater recompense or a severer punishment" (110). W. Robertson Nicoll follows this same line of thought. Concerning the harshness of the term *cut asunder* in verse 46, he says, "The retention of this strong word by Lk., who seems to have it for one of his aims to soften harsh expressions, is noticeable, especially when he understands it as referring to the Apostles, and even to Peter" (561). The conclusion of the foregoing scholars is that the more endowed and enlightened a member of the

Body is, the weightier responsibility he bears and must thus expect a greater recompense for his service or a severer punishment for his negligence in doing the will of God.

The details of the Lord's parable in chapter 12 are adequate to identify the persons to whom the parable refers. Watchman Nee provides two proofs from this passage that those spoken of are true believers and *bona fide* servants of Christ (421). First, the Lord calls them slaves (v. 7). In the New Testament God never considers those who do not belong to Him as His slaves. If a man is not God's son, he is not qualified to be God's slave. To serve God is man's glory, which His slaves will enjoy even in eternity (Rev. 22:3). Second, the Lord sets the steward in Luke 12:42 through 44 over the service of His household, clearly pointing to those who minister Christ as spiritual nourishment to the members of the church, which is God's house (1 Tim. 3:15). Christ as the Head of the church has never and will never appoint a "thief and a robber," "fierce wolves," or "false brothers" over His household (John 10:1; Acts 20:29; Gal. 2:4). That false apostles, deceitful workers, and ministers of Satan (2 Cor. 11:13-15) have been placed in positions of leadership in the outward, nominal church is the operation of the evil one; Christ would never acknowledge such ones. Thus, the steward in Luke 12:42 is a genuine minister of Christ.

After speaking of the faithful and prudent steward, Jesus continued, "But if that slave says in his heart..." (v. 45). This strongly proves that the evil, unwatchful slave in verses 45 and 46 and the slave that did not do his master's will in verses 47 and 48 is "that slave," the steward in verse 42. According to his changing mind (James 1:8), a saved person can be an evil slave as well as a proper one. Thus, even the unknowing and negligent slave in Luke 12 is a regenerated believer and a genuine servant of Christ. Nee concludes,

The Lord says that a slave can be faithful or unfaithful and that an unfaithful slave will not only miss the reward, but will also be condemned and receive a definite punishment...These verses do not say that those who do not know will not receive any lashes; they only say that they will receive few lashes. There will still be the lashes. God does not let those who do not know get by, because His word is here. Those who know have to be responsible before God; those who do not know and who have done things worthy of lashes will still receive lashes, yet they will receive few lashes. Everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required from him; and to whom much has been committed, they will ask of him all the more. This is the principle of God's future chastisement. Luke 12:47-48 settles for us the question of future chastisement of Christians before God. (422)

Being Perfected for the Doing of God's Will

Hebrews 13:20 and 21 say,

Now the God of peace, He who brought up from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great Shepherd of the sheep, in the blood of an eternal covenant, perfect you in every good work for the doing of His will, doing in us that which is well pleasing in His sight through Jesus Christ; to Him be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

God has a will, a purpose, a good pleasure, a counsel, and an economy. God's will is His wish, desire, inclination, intention, determined resolve, and deliberate design. This will is altogether centered on the all-inclusive, all-extensive Christ, who is the centrality and universality of God's economy. Moreover, God purposes that this unsearchably rich Christ be expressed through the church, which is His Body and His fullness. Thus, God's will is great, universal, eternal, and perfect. For a believer to do God's will, not merely occasionally but habitually and continually, he must receive Christ, experience Christ, enjoy Christ, walk in Christ, and live Christ. In addition, he must have a vision of the church and live and serve in the proper, daily, and practical church life. To this end the God of peace is perfecting us, His slaves, in every good work that we may know God's will, be governed by the vision of His will, and do His will. Those who care for the will of God in this way will be rewarded by Christ at His coming, but those who do not prepare or do the will of God will be chastised at the judgment seat of Christ. May the Lord grant us a vision of His great, eternal, and perfect will, and may we, having received this highest knowledge, receive His grace and supply to live in His will.

by John Campbell

Notes

¹There are those expositors, of course, who are quick and unyielding to assign any mention of chastisement at the Lord's coming uniquely to the unregenerated unbelievers. One such is Richard C. H. Lenski, who claims that *many lashes* and *few*

lashes (Luke 12:47-48) indicate that "there are great differences even in hell" (710). However, the parabolic warnings in Luke 12 require a keener, broader interpretation.

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Footnotes from the Recovery Version of the Bible

"Look therefore carefully how you walk, not as unwise, but as wise, redeeming the time, because the **days** are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but **understand** what the will of the Lord is" (Eph. 5:15-17).

days: In this evil age (Gal 1:4) every day is an evil day full of pernicious things that cause our time to be used ineffectively, to be reduced, and to be taken away. Therefore, we must walk wisely that we may redeem the time, seizing every available opportunity.

understand: To understand the will of the Lord is the best way to redeem our time (v. 16). Most of our time is wasted because we do not know the will of the Lord.