

Thy Will Be Done

In the name of him who submitted himself to his Father's will and gave himself to death on a cross for us, dear friends in Christ: Last week I when we met for our Lenten evening devotion, I began by asking if you would liked to have been part of one of the truly noble causes or outstanding achievements of human history. Wouldn't it be nice to know that through your hard work and sacrifices you helped mankind in a substantial way? The specific examples I used were being one of the NASA engineers who helped put the first man on the moon, or one of the many brave soldiers who stormed the beach at Normandy and helped rid the world of Nazi tyranny, or one of the team of medical scientists that helped eradicate polio. Wouldn't it be terrific to have something like that in the legacy you leave behind? Seriously, raise your hand if that wouldn't appeal to you at least a little. ... No, I didn't think there'd be anybody: we'd all like to be part of truly good and noble cause. And the point I was making last week is that by praying the second petition of the Lord's Prayer, "Thy Kingdom come", that's exactly what you are doing. By praying for the coming of God's Kingdom, you're praying that God would send his Holy Spirit to you and to others to enlighten hearts and minds so that God's Word can be understood and so that faith in Jesus Christ can take root and grow. And when that happens, people are rescued from sin and death and they become citizens of heaven and heirs of eternal life. My friends, there is no greater cause that you could possibly be a part of – and by praying for it, you are.

But that was last week's message. This evening I'd like to begin by asking you to use your imagination. Here we go: it's the seventh of June, 1944 – a day after the Normandy invasion has begun. You're a US soldier deployed in England; but your unit is not involved in the fighting – it's not that kind of unit. Let's say that you're assigned as a supply clerk in the 444th shoe repair battalion. You wear the uniform of a soldier and you're doing a job that needs to be done; but the chances of you seeing any actual combat are next to nothing. But, of course, you went through basic training like everyone else, so you know how to shoot a rifle and throw grenades and dig foxholes and all that other stuff soldiers do. Okay, now you're working away at your job, maybe ordering another shipment of heels and hobnails for boots wounded in action, when suddenly they call your unit to assemble in formation. The colonel explains that things over at Omaha beach are critical. The enemy has launched a major counter attack against sector blue dog seven and our boys over there on the beach are getting pounded. They've suffered heavy losses and they are in imminent danger of being overrun and pushed back into the sea. There are no reserves available to back them up. So now we're looking for volunteers. We'll take anyone. We need warm bodies with rifles and we need them fast to plug what is surely soon to become a catastrophic breach in the line. It's where the fighting is the hottest, and the casualty rates are expected to run as high as ninety percent – that's why we're asking for volunteers and not forcing anyone to go. Got it? Now, raise your hand if you want to volunteer.

Hmm ... even though we're just using our imaginations, it's a little more difficult now, isn't it? It's one thing to say that you'd like to be part of great and noble cause; but quite another to volunteer to put yourself in harm's way to advance it. But I have some news for you: if you've ever prayed the third petition of the Lord's Prayer, and I think it's more than safe to assume that you all have, then you've already volunteered – no, not simply in your imagination to help turn the tide in a fictional crisis on the Normandy beachhead; but for a real battle – a very real battle far more deadly and dangerous than any that took place in WWII. This is a battle against a determined enemy who keeps pressing his attack and who is not willing to give up even an inch of ground without a fight. This enemy doesn't know or care anything about the Geneva Convention either. He fights dirty. He's more evil and lot more sneaky and unprincipled than any terrorist. All he wants to do is hurt, maim, and kill the people that God loves – and not just in time; but for all eternity.

I speak, of course, of our adversary, the devil. And you'd better believe that he is everything I just described and worse. And he's busy. He is busy everywhere; but especially where God's Word is being taught in its truth and purity, and where the Holy Spirit is present shedding his divine light to bring people to faith and increased trust in the Lord Jesus; because wherever those things are happening, there the Kingdom of God is making headway against Satan's kingdom of darkness. And you can be sure that's where the fighting is going to be the hottest and heaviest because that's where the enemy is defending his turf. And

look: we already know who's going to win this war. Satan is going to be defeated. God's Kingdom will come. The question is will you be part of it? The question is will you be part of helping it to come. When you pray the third petition of the Lord's Prayer, you're asking God to put you into the thick of the fight.

You see, one of the things a person does in the process of becoming a soldier is to swear to follow the lawful orders of their superiors. And by doing so the person says, "I'll do what I'm told – even if it doesn't make sense to me or I don't understand why. I recognize that there's a greater cause and a greater good to be won, and that people higher up the chain of command can see the big picture much better than I can. And so, I'll follow my orders. I'll do the best I can. And if that means doing things that I don't want to do or going where it's dangerous and risking life and limb, I'll still give the performance of my duty top priority. I'll do what I'm told or I'll die trying." So, what a soldier promises to do is to relinquish his own will, his own physical comfort, his own wants and desires, in order to submit to the will of his appointed leaders. And that's what we're saying when we pray the third petition: "Heavenly Father, let it be that I do your will." The petition is an oath of enlistment in the Army of God with the request that he make you a good soldier who follows orders and who will submit your own will to his.

You know, sometimes in human organizations mistakes are made, bad orders are given, the people in charge don't see all of the big picture; and sometimes despite their best efforts they fail in the end. And on account of that, sometimes it's appropriate for subordinates to question their orders or the appropriateness of the circumstances in which they find themselves. But none of those things can happen in God's Kingdom. He doesn't make any mistakes. What he decrees is always what's best for everyone in his Kingdom. Furthermore, it has been said that military leadership (or any kind of leadership for that matter) is the art of getting people to willingly and enthusiastically do what they don't want to do by nature. It's also been said that a good leader gets them to do what he wants and think that they like it. Christ our Lord is a good leader – there are none better; the trouble is that we aren't very good followers. The prayer is that he would make us that way. The prayer is that we might learn to humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God and accept the discipline and circumstances in which he places upon us.

And it should be said here that not all discipline is punitive in nature. Sure, we all have bad behaviors and sinful habits that need to be worked out of us, and so it's fitting that the Lord give us a "swat on the behind" when we need one. I think you know what I'm talking about. But a lot of discipline has to do with developing right behaviors and building endurance and strength. When I was a military officer, a big part of my job was subjecting the soldiers under my command to hardships of various kinds. I'd deliberately place them (and myself) under physical and mental stress – working long hours under difficult conditions. It was not to punish anyone. It was to prepare ourselves to be able to do our jobs under the very worst conditions that a real battle would bring. In the same way, much of the discipline the Lord places upon us is to prepare us to accomplish his will when it really matters. Think of the biblical character Joseph. First, he's sold into slavery by his brothers. Then, in slavery, he works as the business manager in Potiphar's house under fairly cushy conditions for seven years. Then he's falsely accused of a crime and sent to prison. There he spends next seven years acting as the warden's business manager in the worst of conditions. Surely there must have been times when he asked, "Why is God doing all this to me? How can any good possibly come from this?" We find out later in the story when Joseph is promoted to the position of business manager for all of Egypt. Then he spends seven years storing up supplies during the years of plenty so that millions of people will be saved from starvation during the seven hard years of famine that follow. So we see that the Lord was using Joseph's hardships to train and prepare him for the much bigger task he had for him to do later. When we pray the third petition, we're asking the Lord to help us to believe that the same is true for us, and to trust him in such that in the face of danger, peril, loss, hardship, or even death we are able to say, "You're in charge Lord; and I know that you know what you're doing. Give me the strength to stand and do your will no matter how hard or tough the battle against the enemy gets."

And speaking of the enemy, part of any good battle plan is understanding who he is and how he operates. So it'll be good to take a few moments to consider what we're up against. Have you ever noticed that bad guys usually seem to come in threes? In WWII the triple axis of evil was Nazi Germany, Fascist Italy, and Imperial Japan; during the Cold War it was the Soviet Union, Red China, and in our own back yard Castro's Cuba; more recently it's Syria, Iran, and North Korea that have been called the triple axis of evil. Then there's the perennial death and taxes and ... hmm ... I'm not sure what the third member of that trio

is ... maybe it's mothers-in-law, or pastors who talk too much. In any case, ever since the fall of man into sin the true triple axis of evil has been the devil, the world, and our own sinful flesh. Let's look at each of them real quick:

We've already spoken a little about the devil; but I want you to understand what he's really all about. In a sermon message a couple weeks ago, I made the point that when all is said and done, we are engaged in a war of words. Because we are saved by grace through faith, in the end it all comes down to *what do you believe to be true?* Do you believe in God's Word and specifically in the salvation achieved for you by the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus on the cross for your sin? Or do you trust in something else? The answer to those questions determines whether you are a victor in God's Kingdom or a loser in Satan's. And with this in mind we can see that ultimately Satan's biggest weapon is the power to deceive. His goal is to get you to trust in something other than Christ and his forgiveness because if he can achieve that, you lose. So we expect to see him where God's Word is being challenged, or twisted, or discounted, or revised, or whatever other method might be used to cast doubt on it.

And that's where his two allies come into play. First there's the world. It's the material order in which we live that Satan uses to help deceive us. And there are a thousand ways to do it. It could be riches that tempt us to rely on them instead of God, or the lack of riches that get us to doubt God's goodness and provision. It could be family or friends who discourage us in our walk of faith, or pleasures that take us away from opportunities to feed our faith, or human wisdom that honors science that specifically denies the faith. Satan knows how to use just about anything to lure us away from God's truth. And when he can't lure us away, he tries to interject the world into the church, like when instead of relying on God's Word and Sacraments and the power of the Holy Spirit working through them to advance God's Kingdom, Christians are encouraged to look to psychology, business models, slick advertising campaigns, or other theologically faulty methods for success. All of these are ways Satan can use the world and its glory to deceive us; and he's very good at it.

And part of the reason he has so much success is that he has an ally planted inside each of us: it's our own sinful natures that are naturally inclined to disbelieve God and that cause us to want to trust in ourselves. It's because we trust in ourselves – and in Satan's other deceptions – that we want to assert our own wills and reject the will of God for our lives. According to our sinful natures, we honestly believe that sinning will make us happy, that selfishness is the key to success, that the glory of this world is what we ought to be shooting for because who knows what happens next, and that by the works of our own hands we can do something to achieve (in whole or in part) salvation for ourselves. None of that is true, of course, and yet to a certain degree we believe all of it.

And so again, what we're praying for in the third petition is that this deceived fallen nature in us may be overcome – no, more than overcome: actually put to death so that we gladly and willingly submit ourselves to God's good, gracious, and infinitely wise will. And as we do this, we have as our example the Lord Jesus Christ who willingly surrendered his will to his Father's, and who endured hardships and agonies untold, even a horrific death on a cross – in order to achieve the greatest good of all: our salvation. And because he has done this, it's far more than an example for us: it's actually the means whereby our sinful natures are put to death through repentance, and by which he breathes new life into us by the power of his Spirit so that we are enabled both to desire and to do our Father's holy will.

My dear friends in Christ: I asked earlier, who wants to volunteer? May we be given the grace to pray now and always, "Father, thy will be done". In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!