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Pursuing Holiness: Holiness and Our Wills

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Why is it that we struggle so much to do the right thing? To do what we know is pleasing to God? We know what we're supposed to do, but temptation comes and we just cave into it. We've look at the things that make up our responsibility for holiness – the need for conviction and commitments, perseverance and discipline, and of holiness in body and spirit – but underlying all those things is the activity of our wills. And that's because it's the will that ultimately determines our moral destiny – whether we are holy or unholy in our character and in our conduct.

It's because of this that it's then important for us to understand how our wills work – what causes them to turn one way or another, why they make the choices they do. And most importantly, we need to learn how to bring our wills into submission and obedience with the will of God, on a practical, daily, and even an hour by hour basis.

I think to help us understand how the will functions, we need to go back the idea of the "heart" as it's presented by Scripture. Back this past Spring I gave you John Owen's definition of the heart as the Bible talks about it: it refers to the faculties of the soul as they work together in doing good or evil – the *mind*, the *emotions*, the *conscience*, and the *will*.

All these faculties were put in man's soul by God, but they were corrupted through Adam's fall in the Garden of Eden. Our reason (our understanding) was darkened (Ephesians 4:18). Our desires were entangled (Ephesians 2:3). And our wills were perverted (John 5:40). The fall messed us up. But with our new birth our reason is again enlightened, our affections and desires are redirected, and our wills are subdued. But even though this is true, it doesn't happen all at once. In actual experience it's a growing process. We're told to renew our minds (Romans 12:2), to set our affections on things above

(Colossians 3:1), and to submit our wills to God (James 4:7).

On top of that, when God originally created us, our reason, our emotions, and our wills all worked together in perfect harmony. As God originally created us, our *reason* led the way in understanding the will of God, our *will* consented to God's will, and our *emotions* delighted in doing it. But when we fell into sin our soul's stopped working that way. These three faculties started working at cross-purposes with each other and with God. Our will became stubborn and rebellious and no longer consents to what our reason tells us to be the will of God. Or, maybe more often, our emotions get the upper hand and draw away both our reason and our will from obedience to God. I think if we each look at our struggles with sin we can see how all this is working out for us.

My point is to emphasise and help us to be able to understand the interrelation of the mind, emotions, and will. Ultimately the will is what determines our choices, but as it works out its choices, it's informed and influenced by whatever happens to be the strongest force brought to bear on it.

And of course, those forces come from all sorts of different places: we're bombarded by subtle and not-so-subtle suggestions from the world and even from the devils (Ephesians 2:2). Our own sinful natures entice us to evil (James 1:14). It might be the urgent voice of conscience, the earnest reasoning of a loving friend, or the quiet prompting of the Holy Spirit. But regardless of where they come from, they reach our wills either through our reason or our emotions.

Because of that we need to guard what enters our minds and what influences our emotions. Solomon said in Proverbs 4:23, "Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life" (NASB). If we diligently guard our minds and emotions, we'll see the Holy Spirit working in us to conform our wills to his own. That's what St. Paul tells us in Philippians 2:12-13. The practical question then is how do we guard our minds and emotions?

David wrote in Psalm 119:9: "How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word." David learned to guard his way with the Word of God. The Bible talks to us mainly through our reason, and this is why

it's so vitally important for our minds to be constantly brought under Scripture's influence. There aren't any shortcuts to holiness that bypass or give little priority to consistent intake of the Bible. You can't skip the Word and ever expect to be holy.

In Proverbs 2:10-12 Solomon writes that wisdom, understanding, and discretion will guard us from the evil way. These are qualities of our minds. How do we get them? He says in Proverbs 2:6: "For the LORD gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding." And to whom does he give these things? He gives them to the one who receives his sayings, who inwardly treasures his commandments, who opens his ears and listens for God's wisdom and who opens his heart for understanding, who prays for discernment and understanding, and who looks for understanding as if it were hidden treasure (Proverbs 2:1-5).

You don't have to dig very deeply into Proverbs 2 to see that the influence of God's Word comes as a result of diligent, prayerful, and purposeful intake of Scripture. To guard our minds, we have to give priority to the Bible in our lives – not just for the spiritual formation that it gives us, but also for the daily application of it as we go about our business.

But we can't stop with just guarding our minds. We have to guard our emotions too. I think it helps to remember that while God most often appeals to our will through our reason, sin and Satan usually appeal to us through our desires. Yes, Satan does attack our reason to confuse and to cloud the issues, but that's only to enable him to conquer us through our desires. This is the strategy he used with Eve in Genesis 3. He attacked her reason by questioning God's integrity, but his main temptation was to her desire. We read that Eve saw that the tree was *good* for food, it was a *delight* to the eyes, and *desirable* for making one wise (Genesis 3:6).

Knowing that Satan attacks us mainly through our desires, we should watch over them diligently and bring the Word of God to bear on them constantly. I'm not talking about asceticism, where we retreat from everything – because Satan can tempt our desires no matter how far we run away from worldly things. What I am talking about is spiritual prudence – spiritual common sense. We each need to

be aware of how sin attacks us through our desires, and then we need to take appropriate preventative measures. This is what Paul urged Timothy to do when he said to him, “flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness” (2 Timothy 2:22).

But guarding our desires is more than fighting a rear-guard defensive action against temptations from the world, the flesh, and the devil. We need to be on the offensive. Paul didn't just say to flee youthful passions. He also said to pursue righteousness. He tells us to set our hearts on things above – on spiritual values (Colossians 3:1). The psalmist encourages us to *delight* ourselves in the law of God (Psalm 1:2), and it was said prophetically of Jesus, “I *delight* to do Thy will, O my God” (Psalm 40:8 NASB). We need to set our desires on spiritual things, and delight ourselves in the law and will of God.

And that brings us back full circle to discipline – to some kind of a structured plan. Because normally our reason, wills, and emotions should work in that order: reason...will...emotion, but since we so often get them reversed, giving attention to our desires, we need to work at directing those desires toward God's will.

When I was growing up I joined the swim team in our town. With a couple of breaks, I swam competitively from the third grade through high school. In college I decided that I needed to be more active. Since I was burned out on swimming, I took up bicycling. It helped that the guy who lived across the hall from me was on the cycling team. I jumped right into it. I remember going out the first times with him and a couple of girls who were on the team too. We went out for about 25 miles, which was nothing for them, but I hadn't done any real bicycling since junior high. The only reason I didn't collapse on the side of the road after the first ten miles was by sheer will power – I didn't want to look like a wimp in front of two cute girls in spandex. I practically fell asleep eating dinner that evening and when I woke up in the morning I could barely move. I took a couple of days to recover and did it again. Before long I was back in shape, but that didn't stop it being challenging. And I'm not one of those people who jumps into things just for the sake of a challenge.

I needed help to stay with it, so after a few months I subscribed to *Bicycling* magazine. I enjoyed reading about the science of bicycling, what to do for a good workout, and reading about the success stories of competitors and regular people. Every month I looked forward to the next issue coming. Now I didn't *need* to read that stuff. I didn't need to be convinced that it was good exercise and that I needed that exercise. I didn't really need to read all the advice in the magazine. Most of what it said I learned from the bicycling team members I went riding with. What I needed was motivation. Between having friends who would drag me out for a ride when I didn't feel like it and reading the stories about people and the accomplishments they made on their bicycles – that's what motivated me and got me on the bike consistently. I influenced my will mainly through my emotions (by motivation) when I couldn't do it through my reason (by understanding why it was important that I get some exercise).

The Bible gives us instructions and guidelines that ought to inform and appeal to our reason, but it's also full of motivational success stories of real people who trusted God and obeyed him and whose lives were changed dramatically or who made a significant impact on the course of history. Think of Hebrews 11 and the list of great Old Testament saints there. We call it the Faith Hall of Fame. We can read about Daniel, Nehemiah, and Elijah as well as Abraham, Noah, and David and they can all motivate us to go and do likewise. We would do well to constantly include the accounts of some of these great saints in our Bible reading to motivate us in areas of holiness.

And while Scripture ought to be our main source of motivation, it's not the only one. Just as I had friends who would ride alongside me, we have our brothers and sisters in Christ to do the same with us as we pursue the things of God. We can read the motivational stories and writings of the great saints of the Church and we can let ourselves be helped along by our brothers and sisters right here in the local congregation. The basic idea is to have a plan – a disciplined approach – that will enable us to stay motivated to holiness.

In the final analysis it's God who works in us to will and to act according to his good

purpose. But we're also told very clearly by St. Paul to work at this ourselves (Philippians 2:12). Our responsibility in terms of our wills is to guard our minds and emotion, being aware of what influences our minds and stimulates our desires. As we do our part, we will see the Spirit of God do his part in making us more holy.