

Sermon #1,144: Romans 8:24-30

5-10-15 (Easter 6, Rogate Sunday), Bethany-Princeton MN

Hymns: 379, 394, 517, 434; communion hymns 359, 208)

THE HARDEST PRAYER: THY WILL BE DONE

Prayer: O Lord Jesus Christ, You said to Your disciples, “Whatever you shall ask in My name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son”: Give us grace, we beseech You, to ask aright; teach us to bring our requests into harmony with Your mind and will; and grant that both our prayers and our lives may be acceptable in Your sight, to the glory of God the Father. Amen. (*Parish Prayers*)

The Text, Romans 8:24-30. ²⁴ For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? ²⁵ But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance. ²⁶ Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groaning which cannot be uttered. ²⁷ Now He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He makes intercessions for the saints according to the will of God. ²⁸ And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose. ²⁹ For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren. ³⁰ Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified. Lord, this is Your Word and these are Your words. Sanctify us by the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear fellow redeemed in Christ, who intercedes for us: Grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Of all the petitions in the Lord’s Prayer, “Thy will be done” is the hardest one to pray. We rattle it off rather quickly when we say the Lord’s Prayer, since we are often not thinking of anything in particular. But in your moments of crisis, or when you are facing a major disappointment, when a door slams in your face and the path you were on seems to be blocked, or when you have a major worry, if there is potential cancer, or there really is cancer, or if there’s an untimely accident or the death of the one person you couldn’t go on without, try saying, “Thy will be done.” This is a prayer that becomes harder and harder to say.

This is when prayer becomes a major struggle. You sweat it out. Didn't Jesus? When He was praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, and sweating great drops of blood, what was He praying? *"Not My will, but Thy will be done."*

This is one thing that makes us unsure what to pray, as St. Paul says here in Romans 8: **"Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groaning which cannot be uttered."**

Why would be unsure of what to pray? We learn in the catechism that by teaching us to say, "Our Father," God is tenderly telling us that we are His true children, so that we may come to Him with all boldness and confidence.

But do you always come to Him with boldness and confidence? No, you don't. This is because sometimes life beats you down, and you don't see God answering your prayers, in fact sometimes you see the opposite that almost nothing you pray for comes to pass, nothing is working out, and things seem to be getting worse, you have more worries not less, more doors closing than opening.

Often when we pray, it's in the midst of fear and darkness and worry. So more often than not, the prayers do not flow out of us but almost have to be squeezed out of us. Praying isn't the first thing, often it's the last thing. Or we just don't get to it at all. We pray tentatively and unconfidently. We pray through tears. We hardly even know what to say. We are unsure and uncertain. Often we can hardly even get the words out; it's just a sigh or a groan.

This is especially true when it comes to the prayer, *"Thy will be done."* You know you are supposed to say this. But sometimes it hurts to say it. You can only groan it. You are aware that your prayers are not what they should be. When you say, *"Thy will be done,"* you have to deal with the fact that what you want may not in fact be what God wants for you right now. When it comes to saying "Thy will be done" during a crisis, or a scary illness, or after a death, it is

something that in our heart of hearts we really don't want to say, and sometimes all we can do is groan. Into this situation of our agony, anguish and suffering, when we ask, "Why, Lord?" -- which is another way of asking, "*What is God's will, and why doesn't it match up with what my will is?*" – look at what He says.

First, that **"the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses,"** specifically in how we pray, and that **"the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groaning which cannot be uttered."** This says that when you don't know what to pray, the Holy Spirit prays it for you. He turns your groans into beautiful prayers. He also takes whatever is wrong or lacking with your prayer and removes what is wrong. The Holy Spirit is the one who gives you faith. Through faith, Jesus' blood purifies your prayer, so that whatever comes to the throne of God as your prayer is transformed into what is only lovely and pleasing to Him. This too is the work of the Holy Spirit. You only say "*Thy will be done,*" with His help.

But second, what God says in response to your difficulty in saying "*Thy will be done*" is to utter those well-known and well-loved words of verse 28, **"And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose."** This is a verse people return to again and again, usually in times of hardship and trouble, which coincidentally is the very time you have a hard time saying, "*Thy will be done.*"

But these are times when it is not so clear that **"all things work together for good."** That's why the next verses are important. Verse 28 leads into a discussion of how God predestined and called us in eternity to be His own, how He chose us not because He knew there would be any good in us but purely by grace, His undeserved love; and **"whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified."** Here He gives the full sweep of your life story from when God placed His love upon you in eternity before the world began, how He lovingly and with

great determination carries out your salvation throughout your life, through all the ups and downs of your life and all the ups and downs of your faith, until finally you are “**glorified**,” you land safe in heaven.

These verses have a lot to do with the subject of God’s will. It says here that you are “**the called**,” and it says “**called according to His purpose**.” His purpose is your salvation. I believe a misunderstanding of this verse has led to a lot of confused talk among Christians about God having “a plan” for your life, and they try to discern the plan, thinking it is about every little twist and turn in this transitory life. But God’s “plan,” or as it actually says here, His “**purpose**,” is your salvation. It is God’s revealed will, revealed in His Word; it is His will for you to be saved and to live in accordance with what He says. Being in line with His “plan,” His purpose, is living in repentance and faith, and intending to live a holy life with God’s help. It’s limited to His revealed will.

The sufferings that we experience, on the other hand, are part of God’s hidden will. He does not tell us why. I wish I could tell you. I wish I could stand up here and say definitively that because God sees that your faith needs it, He allows this or that to happen to you. I don’t know God’s hidden will any better than you. But what these verses do is to put all of this in the light of eternity.

It is because you are the called, and God is determined to carry out His eternal election of you, that His love will not let you go, nor is He willing that you should remain out of His grasp. The “**good**” is your eternal salvation. That’s what “**all things**” are working toward, through God’s guiding hand. God never loses sight of the ultimate good, the final goal, even when you do. Some things that you’d consider “good” are the very things that God knows are not good for you. He says no to some things that you want and He says yes to some things that you don’t, but from what this verse says, all of it is done by Him in view of the ultimate “**good**” that is your being saved for eternity.

One important aspect of this is how God deals with your sins. He forgives your sins when you repent. God forgives and forgets. But we can't forget them so easily, can we? God uses this. He uses our painful memories of the sins we've done, and consequences we have from our sins, to discipline us so we'll want to flee those sins – so that we will conform our will to His revealed will.

For example, God forgives the sin of divorce. This doesn't mean that people can presumptuously divorce, counting on asking for God's forgiveness later and not really trying to remain married. No, God forgives the sin of divorce when people truly repent of their sins that were the cause of a broken marriage and a broken home. In His eyes the sin is completely erased, because Jesus' death completely paid for the guilt of these sins. God does not forgive this sin so a person can think, *"Well, that meant nothing. It never happened,"* and go do the same thing again. No, God uses the pain that such a sin brings to people, to train a person to be more careful about the choices they make, to be more humble and unselfish in married life if they're granted another marriage. Is it God's will that the pain of a sin like divorce come to a person? No. But that it **"works together for good,"** in other words *"He turns it into a blessing,"* doesn't mean the sin itself was a good thing, but instead God lets the consequences of the sin stand, uses it to "chasten" a person, discipline them, which really means to *teach* them by means of this hard lesson how blessed it is to walk in His ways and not their own. He does this in view of the ultimate **"good,"** your eternal salvation, so you won't go farther astray but will be brought back to the narrow path leading to eternal life.

This "chastening" – which means disciplining, or teaching, not in a classroom but in life, in the school of experience – is what God is doing when we are so confused here below as to why God allows so many "bad things" to happen. It is all **"for good,"** but it isn't the good we can see, it is for the ultimate good, that we would remain close to Him, be saved for eternity and not remain lost in sin.

So faced with His hidden will that we cannot know – which drives us to pray and sometimes leaves us feeling weak in our prayers -- we are left holding onto His revealed will, His written Word – which works in us the right faith and gives us confidence to pray. In His Word He reveals, doesn't keep secret, that **“all things work together for good to those who love God, who are the called according to His purpose.”** We only know it because He tells us. This is a promise He makes, that all things are working together for our ultimate good.

All promises that He makes in His Word are the Gospel, the good news, of what He does for you out of love. You see His love most clearly in Christ, in His cross. In Christ He looks away from your sins and gives you everything by grace. This and only this makes your faith stronger when you pray. This is how you know God is listening to you and overcoming the devil for you. The key to prayer, the key to praying *“Thy will be done,”* is not in your struggle but it is in Jesus' struggle for you. The key to praying *“Thy will be done”* is to have more Jesus, to hear His words forgiving you, to see that all His will for your salvation is done.

This is how you know He will do only good for you – as we'll hear next Sunday as we come to verse 32: *“He who did not spare His own Son, but delivered Him up for us all, shall with Him also freely give us all things”* – all things working together for your good, being turned into blessings, eternal ones. Amen!