

THE PERFECT VS. THE PERMISSIVE WILL OF GOD

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Scripture: Numbers 22: 1-22

While we were praying, both in the first and the second service, the Lord just placed the word 'brokenness' on my heart. I wondered what that meant, but felt that the Lord is the one who is able to fix. He made us. He knows every part of us, and he knows how to fix the broken areas. And sometimes, that's what we carry with us when we come to church. We bundle all the brokenness and bring it, just trusting that He will lead and touch.

I just put it out because when the Lord lays something like that on our hearts, then it means that this might be a *Kairos* time where He wants to touch brokenness. So, if that's who you are, then allow Him to speak to you through service, allow Him to bring healing to you as you come to the table, and be open to whatever it is that He might want to do in your lives today.

Numbers 22:1-22

¹ Then the sons of Israel journeyed, and camped in the plains of Moab beyond the Jordan opposite Jericho.

² Now Balak the son of Zippor saw all that Israel had done to the Amorites. ³ So Moab was in great fear because of the people, for they were numerous; and Moab was in dread of the sons of Israel. ⁴ Moab said to the elders of Midian, "Now this horde will lick up all that is around us, as the ox licks up the grass of the field." And Balak the son of Zippor was king of Moab at that time. ⁵ So he sent messengers to Balaam the son of Beor, at Pethor, which is near the River, in the land of the sons of his people, to call him, saying, "Behold, a people came out of Egypt; behold, they cover the surface of the land, and they are living opposite me. ⁶ Now, therefore, please come, curse this people for me since they are too mighty for me; perhaps I may be able to defeat them and drive them out of the land. For I know that he whom you bless is blessed, and he whom you curse is cursed."

⁷ So the elders of Moab and the elders of Midian departed with the fees for divination in their hand; and they came to Balaam and repeated Balak's words to him. ⁸ He said to them, "Spend the night here, and I will bring word back to you as the Lord may speak to me." And the leaders of Moab stayed with Balaam. ⁹ Then God came to Balaam and said, "Who are these men with you?" ¹⁰ Balaam said to God, "Balak the son of Zippor, king of Moab, has sent word to me, ¹¹ 'Behold, there is a people who came out of Egypt and they cover the surface of the land; now come, curse them for me; perhaps I may be able to fight against them and drive them out.'" ¹² God said to Balaam, "Do not go with them; you shall not curse the people, for they are blessed." ¹³ So Balaam arose in the morning and said to Balak's leaders, "Go back to your land, for the Lord has refused to let me go with you." ¹⁴ The leaders of Moab arose and went to Balak and said, "Balaam refused to come with us."

¹⁵ Then Balak again sent leaders, more numerous and more distinguished than the former. ¹⁶ They came to Balaam and said to him, "Thus says Balak the son of Zippor, 'Let nothing, I beg you, hinder you from coming to me; ¹⁷ for I will indeed honor you richly, and I will do whatever you say to me. Please come then, curse this people for me.'" ¹⁸ Balaam replied to the servants of Balak, "Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not do anything, either small or great, contrary to the command of the Lord my God. ¹⁹ Now please, you also stay here tonight, and I will find out what else the Lord will speak to me." ²⁰ God came to Balaam at night and said to him, "If the men

have come to call you, rise up and go with them; but only the word which I speak to you shall you do.”²¹ So Balaam arose in the morning, and saddled his donkey and went with the leaders of Moab.

²² But God was angry because he was going, and the angel of the Lord took his stand in the way as an adversary against him. Now he was riding on his donkey and his two servants were with him.

You know, the story of Balaam in Numbers 22 is one of the most puzzling and yet, most instructive passages in Scripture. On the surface, it seems contradictory. God clearly tells Balaam not to go with the men sent by Balak, the king of Moab. Yet later, when Balaam presses again, God tells him to go. And then, as Balaam sets out, the text says that God’s anger burned against him.

Why would God permit Balaam to go, but then be angry that he went? It’s in this tension, beloved, that we discover – between these two seeming polarities – the difference between God’s perfect will and God’s permissive will.

In this story, in Balaam’s story, God speaks directly to Balaam. “Do not go with them. you shall not curse the people for they are blessed.” That was clear. It was God’s perfect will for him. Israel was under His covenant blessing, and no curse could undo that. Balaam, to his credit, initially obeyed. He told Balak’s messengers the next morning, “Go back to your land, for the Lord has refused to let me go with you.”

But Balak was determined. He sent a larger delegation with more distinguished leaders, and raised the stakes with a promise that was almost irresistible. “I will indeed honor you richly,” he said, “and I will do whatever you say.” This was more than a fee for divination; it was like writing a blank cheque. Balaam replied with words that seemed and sounded so strong. “Though Balak were to give me his house full of silver and gold, I could not do anything, either small or great, contrary to the command of the Lord, my God.”

Here’s the thing. Yet he wavered. Instead of dismissing them, and standing on the clear word of God, which had been very clear to him, he said to them, “Please stay the night, and I will find out what else the Lord will speak to me.” And here is where Balaam opened the door for temptation. God had already spoken, and had spoken very clearly. There was nothing more to discuss. But because Balaam kept pressing, God gave him permission. “If the men have come to call you, rise and go with them. But only the word which I speak to you, you shall say or speak.” Balaam went. And we read that God’s anger burnt against him.

The question that immediately surfaces is why? Why would God’s anger burn against him? And the answer is that Balaam was motivated not by obedience to God, but by greed. Outwardly, he appeared submissive. Inwardly, he longed for Balak’s reward. He looked obedient, but was actually divided in loyalty. His lips said, “I will only speak what God tells me,” but his heart whispered, “Perhaps there is still a way to gain the honor and riches that are being offered.

We don’t get too much from this text. But we learn as we do Bible study, that we look at the context, and then we look at the greater context, and then the whole counsel of God. And for us to understand Balaam, we need to look at other scriptures that pertain to him which come particularly in the New Testament.

Hear what Peter says in 2 Peter 2, “Forsaking the right way, they have gone astray. They have followed the way of Balaam, the son of Beor, who loved gain for wrongdoing, but was rebuked for his own transgression.” A speechless donkey spoke with human voice, and restrained the prophet’s

madness. If you read past where I stopped, you will find this whole interesting account of the speaking donkey.

Jude, v.11 “Woe to them! For they walked in the way of Cain, and abandoned themselves for the sake of gain to Balaam’s error, and perished in the Korah rebellion.

It gets even more intriguing as we look at what Revelation 2:14 says about Balaam. Jesus says, “But I have a few things against you. You have some there who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, so that they might eat food sacrificed to idols, and practice sexual immorality.

This was Balaam. This was the man who seemed openly to say: “Whatever the Lord says to me, I’ll do. You can fill my house with silver and gold...” But then he presses, wants to go because of what has been promised to him, as we can see in the text that we look at. Together they show that Balaam is remembered, not for his prophetic words, but for his compromised heart. Outwardly religious, but inwardly greedy and corrupt. And his story is a warning for us, beloved. Divided loyalty always leads to disaster. It’s a principle you can take in spiritual context, and in whatever context you live and work in. Divided loyalty will lead to trouble and disaster.

Balaam wanted to appear righteous before God, while still keeping a door open to worldly gain. And this double-mindedness is dangerous because it cloaks disobedience in the garments of obedience. It is a divided heart – wanting the blessing of God, but also craving the rewards of the world. And scripture tells us clearly in James 1:8 “A double-minded man is unstable in all his ways.” That is why God’s anger burned.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN GOD’S PERFECT WILL AND HIS PERMISSIVE WILL.

God’s perfect will is His holy, unchanging command, what He truly desires for His people. But when we insist on our own way, knowing what God has told us to do, sometimes God permits us to go down that path; not because His will has changed, but in order to expose our hearts.

Psalm 106:15 puts it this way. “He gave them their request, but sent leanness into their soul.” You would think that anything that God gave you would bring abundance to life. But it brought leanness to their soul.

There are other examples, and I want to flesh this out a little, because I don’t want us to walk away from here confused about anything.

Other examples of God’s permissive will.

Take the narrative of Hezekiah in Isaiah 38. Hezekiah fell gravely ill. The prophet Isaiah came to him with a clear word from the Lord. He said, “Set your house in order, for you shall die. You shall not recover.” What did Hezekiah do? He turned his face to the wall, and prayed earnestly, weeping bitterly, and pleading for more years. God responded, and gave him his request. He granted 15 years to his life.

God’s perfect will had already been spoken. But when He gave the 15 years, it was His permissive will. Check out what happened. On the surface, this looks like a wonderful answer to prayer, but those added years became spiritually costly. In those 15 years, Hezekiah grew proud of his wealth. In fact, the Bible tells us that he called the Babylonians to show them all the wealth that he had accumulated. And the prophet Isaiah warned him that one day, these same treasures that he was showing off to the Babylonians would be taken away along with his descendants into captivity and exile.

It was during those extra years that Hezekiah fathered Manasseh. The Bible tells us about Manasseh. He did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, according to the despicable practices of the nations. This child, fathered during those 15 years that Hezekiah had asked God for.

That's the lesson as we look at it. Sometimes God grants our request, not because it is His perfect will, but because we press Him in our desperation. His permissive will may give us what we want, but it may also bring consequences that we never imagined, that would never have happened under God's perfect will for us. If Hezekiah had died when God first spoke, his reign would have ended in honor. Instead, the extension of his life became a time of pride, compromise, and future sorrow for his people.

There are some more examples of God's permissive will in scripture:

- Israel demanded a king. And God told Samuel, "They have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them. What was God's perfect will for Israel? That He would reign as their king forever. But the people insisted, looking at the nations that were around them, saying, "We want a king just like the other nations have." And God permitted them to have Saul. They got what they wanted, but it also brought sorrow and oppression, just as God had warned.
- Moses permitted divorce in Deuteronomy 24. It was not because divorce was God's design. Jesus later explains. "Because of your hardness of heart, Moses allowed you to divorce your wives. But from the beginning, it was not so." Because of the hardness of their hearts, Moses said okay to divorce. God's perfect will was lifelong covenant faithfulness. But he permitted divorce to explain and expose human brokenness.
- When the patriarchs practiced polygamy, God permitted it culturally. But His perfect will was always 'One man and one woman in one flesh union'. Genesis 2:24. Every story of polygamy, Abraham, Jacob, David, Solomon – all of them were marked by conflict, rivalry, and downfall.

When we look at these examples, they show us that God's permissive will may give us what we clamour for, but it is never His best. His perfect will always brings blessing; His permissive will often brings pain.

I want to make one or two clarifications here that are important. There are times when God's permissive will comes into play because we press Him to change what He has already revealed as His perfect will. Balaam, Hezekiah, and Israel, are all examples. Whenever this happens, it will always lead to sorrow and heartache because His perfect will is not being done in our lives. Why does God allow it? To expose our wrong motives. To let us taste the consequences of those wrong motives so that we may repent and come back to Him, knowing that His perfect will is the best for each one of us. In His mercy, He allows us to learn the hard way so that the next time, we won't fall into the same trap. That kind of permissive will is corrective. It teaches us by consequence.

But here's the thing. We cannot look at every trial or challenge or trouble that comes our way and say, "That's because I wandered into God's permissive will." Are you with me? Just because God's permissive will lands us in trouble and conflict and pain and suffering, it doesn't mean that all the suffering and pain in your life is because you strayed from His perfect will. God also allows suffering and pain to help you to grow.

You need to be very careful here that when you look at yourself and say, I'm suffering!" it's good to look back and think. Is it because I've strayed into God's permissive will? But also to know that if this is God's will for you, that it can be God's will for you, that suffering is an integral part of your life.

Examples:

- Joseph, betrayed by his brothers, sold into slavery, wrongfully imprisoned, not because he sinned, but because God was preparing him to become second-in-command in Egypt, the one who would save nations from famine. He had to go through all of that because it was preparation ground for him to take on that task. It was not about permissive will. It was God's perfect will for him.
- Job, afflicted by Satan with God's permission, not because of any wrongdoing on his part, but to prove that true devotion is not based on blessings. We don't worship Him because He blesses us. God said, "Take it away." Job experienced all the hardship that he went through because God was saying to Satan, "Check out my servant Job. He doesn't need blessing to continue to worship me. My children will worship me whether I bless them or not. They worship me for who I am.
- Jesus, allowed by the Father to go through such rejection, injustice, crucifixion. In Gethsemane, when he prayed, it was almost like, "Lord, is there another way? If this cup can pass from Me?" And it's almost like the permissive will of God was in pray here. But then He stops and says, "Nevertheless, not My will, but Thine be done." And it went back to God's perfect will. And out of that perfect will, you and I sit here today.

First distinction.

When we resist God's perfect will and press Him for our own way, it may lead to sorrow, correction, and repentance. When we walk in God's perfect will and He permits hardship, it helps in our growth, refinement, maturity, and blessing because He's shaping us to be in the image of His Son.

That's the contrast.

- God's perfect will was Himself as Israel's king. God's permissive will was Saul, and it led them into grief.
- God's perfect will was one flesh in marriage. God's permissive will was divorce and polygamy, which fractured families.
- The lesson is that God's perfect will is life-giving. His permissive will exposes the poverty of our own desires.

And sometimes God lets us walk into dead ends so we realize only His way brings life.

- Jonah – God permitted him to run from his call. But through a storm and a great fish, Jonah learned the futility of resisting God.
- Prodigal son – the father permitted his son to leave and squander his inheritance. Only by tasting the things in the pigsty, did the son come to his senses and say, "I will return to my father."

Permissive will often and must drive us back to God's perfect will in humility and repentance.

Second distinction.

The Bible tells us to pray without ceasing. So when we keep praying, are we pushing God against His will? And that's the thing. When we pray, Paul says, "Pray without ceasing." Jesus Himself taught the parable of the persistent widow, urging His disciples to always pray and not lose heart.

The Canaanite woman persisted with Jesus until He commended her faith and granted her request. This is perseverance, pressing into God's mercy and timing, never against His character or command. Once you know that God has spoken, continuing to pester Him to change it and give you what you want is leading you into the permissive part of God's will.

Hezekiah did the same. Balaam did not persevere in faith. He pestered God against His clear will. There's a world of difference.

Faithful prayer seeks God's heart. pestering seeks to bend His will to our will. So we need to be careful because the greatest danger is the camouflaged compromise of faith. That's the great danger, when disobedience dresses itself up as obedience. Balaam said all the right things, but his heart was divided. Outwardly, he looked like a prophet of obedience. Inwardly, he was a man of greed and corrupt principles. That is why God's anger burnt against him.

So, we must beware of compromises that look like faith, but are really disobedience, or settling for permissible rather than God's perfect will, or pressing for our way rather than yielding to God's way.

God allows permissible will to reveal our hearts, to teach us the cost of our own desires, our fleshly desires, to refine and discipline us, to accomplish His greater plan for us, and to draw us back to Him. Could God block every wrong choice? That's what we sometimes pray for. Lord, shut all the doors except that one door that You want me to walk through. And God says, "No! I want you to discern My will. I'll keep all six of them open. You pick the right one, because I want you, as a child, to know My will."

Who understands the mind of God but the Spirit of God? And where does the Spirit of God reside? In our hearts, so we understand the mind of God. That's the growth phase in our walk of discipleship – to be able to discern God's will even when there are six doors open. Permissive will is not God abandoning us. It is God patiently allowing us to learn that His way is really the best.

Here's the key, and I'll close with this. Not all hardship means we are out of step with God. Some hardship is the bitter fruit of resisting His will. Other hardship is the refining fire of God's love, producing perseverance, character, and hope. And the difference lies in the heart. Are we resisting His will? Or are we submitting to it? Either way, God is sovereign, and His ultimate goal is to draw us back into the safety and joy of His perfect will.

But if you're like me, there's one question that is buzzing around in my head. How do I know God's perfect will? I have no problem when I look at the commandments. They are clear, black and white. But what do I do when I am trying to understand His perfect will – to change a job, to get into a relationship, to know whether I should do this or that. the subjective parts of knowing God's will, how do I do that? The chances are that I will then not know it is God's will and go into His permissive will.

Seven questions for us to ask about discerning God's will.

1. Does it align with scripture? God's will never contradicts His word.
2. Does it reflect the character of Christ? If Jesus wouldn't do it, it's not God's will.
3. What are my motives? Am I seeking God's glory in this, or my gain?

4. Do I sense the Spirit's peace? God often confirms His will with clarity and inner peace. I've always said this: God's will and God's peace go together. Anytime you wonder whether you're on the right path, ask yourself: Am I in this sense of peace, the peace that passes all understanding in my circumstances? Do I have that peace? And if you don't, begin to retrace your steps to the point where you had it and ask yourself: What decision did I make at that point? And see if it can be changed.
5. What fruit will this decision produce? Will it lead to righteousness, peace, and joy? Or strife and regret?
6. Am I willing to submit to God's answer even if it's, no? true discernment requires surrendered hearts.
7. What do wise godly counsellors say? God often confirms His will through the counsel of mature believers.

Beloved, in closing, I think where I'd like us to land is to be able to say like Jesus: Nevertheless, not. My will but Thine. I want to seek Your perfect will for every decision that I make, Lord. That is the safest place. That is the blessed life and that is the way of God's perfect will.

Amen.
