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Holiness and Our Wills

FOR IT IS GOD WHO WORKS IN
YOU TO WILL AND TO ACT
ACCORDING TO HIS GOOD
PURPOSE.

Philippians 2:13

In all that has been said so far about our responsibility for holiness — the necessity of conviction and commitment, perseverance and discipline, and of holiness in body and in spirit — the activity of our wills is always implied. It is the will that ultimately makes each individual choice of whether we will sin or obey. It is the will that chooses to yield to temptation, or to say no. Our wills, then, ultimately determine our moral destiny, whether we will be holy or unholy in our character and conduct.

This being true, it is critically important that we understand how our wills function — what causes them to turn in one direction or the other, why they make the choices they do. Above all else,

we must learn how to bring our wills into submission and obedience to the will of God, on a practical, daily, hour-by-hour basis.

To help us understand how our wills function, let us review the definition of the heart presented earlier in Chapter 6. In that definition Owen said the heart as used in the Bible generally denotes all the faculties of the soul as they work together in doing good or evil — the mind, the emotions, the conscience, and the will.

These faculties were all implanted in man's soul by God, but were all corrupted through man's fall in the Garden of Eden. Our reason (or understanding) was darkened (Ephesians 4:18), our desires were entangled (Ephesians 2:3), and our wills perverted (John 5:40). With new birth our reason is again enlightened, our affections and desires redirected, and our wills subdued. But though this is true, it is not true all at once. In actual experience it is a growing process. We are told to renew our minds (Romans 12:2), to set our affections on things above (Colossians 3:1),¹ and to submit our wills to God (James 4:7).

Moreover, when God originally created man, the reason, the emotions, and the will all worked in perfect harmony. Reason led the way in understanding the will of God, the will consented to God's will, and the emotions delighted in doing it. But with the entrance of sin into man's soul, these three faculties began to work at cross purposes to one another and to God. The will has become stubborn and rebellious and will not consent to that which reason knows to be the will of God. Or, more

commonly, the emotions get the upper hand and draw away both reason and will from obedience to God.

The point of all this is to emphasize and enable us to understand the interrelation of the mind, emotions, and will. While the will is the ultimate determiner of all choices, it is influenced in its choices by the strongest forces brought to bear upon it.

These compelling forces come from a variety of sources. It may be the subtle suggestions of Satan and his world system (Ephesians 2:2) or the evil enticements of our own sinful nature (James 1:14). It may be the urgent voice of conscience, the earnest reasoning of a loving friend, or the quiet prompting of the Holy Spirit. But from whatever source these compelling forces come, they reach our wills through either our reason or our emotions.

Therefore we must guard what enters our minds and what influences our emotions. Solomon said, "Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life" (Proverbs 4:23). If we diligently guard our minds and emotions, we will see the Holy Spirit working in us to conform our wills to His own (Philippians 2:12-13). How then do we guard our minds and emotions?

David said, "How can a young man keep his way pure? By keeping it according to Thy Word" (Psalm 119:9). David guarded his way with the Word of God. The Bible speaks to us primarily through our reason, and this is why it is so vitally important for our minds to be constantly brought under its influence. There is absolutely no shortcut

to holiness that bypasses or gives little priority to a consistent intake of the Bible.

Solomon told us that wisdom, understanding, and discretion will guard us from the evil way (Proverbs 2:10-12). These are qualities of our minds. How do we acquire these qualities? "For the Lord gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding" (Proverbs 2:6). But to whom does the Lord give these qualities? He gives them to the one who receives His sayings, who inwardly treasures His commandments, who makes his ear alert to wisdom and his heart ready for understanding, who prays for discernment and understanding, and who seeks understanding as if it were hidden treasure (Proverbs 2:1-5).

It is obvious from even a casual reading of Proverbs 2:1-12 that the protective influence of the Word of God comes as a result of diligent, prayerful, and purposeful intake of Scripture. To guard our minds, we must give priority to the Bible in our lives — not just for the spiritual information it gives but also for the daily application of it in our workaday lives.

Not only must we guard our minds, we must also guard our emotions. To do this, it is helpful first to realize that while God most often appeals to our wills through our reason, sin and Satan usually appeal to us through our desires. It is true Satan will attack our reason to confuse and cloud the issues, but that is only to enable him to conquer us through our desires. This is the strategy he employed with Eve (Genesis 3:1-6). He attacked her reason by questioning God's integrity, but his primary

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 primarily through our desires, we should watch over them diligently and bring the Word of God to bear on them constantly. This is not asceticism; it is spiritual prudence. Each of us should seek to be aware of how sin attacks us through our desires, and take preventive actions. This is what Paul urged Timothy to do when he instructed him to "flee the evil desires of youth" (2 Timothy 2:22).

But the guarding of our desires is more than fighting a rear-guard defensive action against temptations from the world, the flesh, and the devil. We must take the offensive. Paul directs us to set our hearts on things above, that is, 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). So we see that we are to set our desires on spiritual things, and delight ourselves in the law and will of God.

So we have come full circle to discipline — to a structured plan. Normally our reason, wills, and emotions should work in that order, but since we so often reverse the order, giving attention to our desires, we must work at directing those desires toward God's will.

When I first began jogging as an exercise, I was unmotivated, and therefore inconsistent in doing it. I knew I should jog, that my body needed the

physical conditioning, and that I would probably be more healthy as a result. But I was out of condition, it required time I didn't think I had, and above all it was painful. So I started, stopped, started, and stopped, never making consistent progress. Then I read Dr. Kenneth Cooper's book *Aerobics*, which documents the importance of strenuous activities such as jogging, that exercise the heart. Dr. Cooper explained why jogging was important, gave a few simple guidelines for doing it, and sprinkled his facts and instructions with many illustrations of people whose physical lives were changed dramatically as a result of jogging.

I found myself reading through that book perhaps a half dozen times. I didn't need to be convinced of the importance of jogging; I was already convinced. And I didn't need to reread the few simple rules; they were clear the first time through the book. What I needed was motivation. And those "success" stories — what I call "before and after" stories — motivated me to go out and jog. Reading and rereading them finally succeeded in making me consistent. I influenced my will through my emotions (by motivation) when I could not through my reason (by understanding the importance of jogging).

Now in addition to giving us instructions and guidelines for living, the Bible is filled with "success" stories of real people who trusted God and obeyed Him and whose lives were changed dramatically or who significantly influenced the course of history. The 11th chapter of Hebrews gives us a brief and partial index of some of these

stories. But there are many more not mentioned (as the writer of Hebrews himself acknowledges in Hebrews 11:32). The exploits of men such as Daniel, Nehemiah, and Elijah as well as Abraham, Noah, and David can motivate us to go and do likewise. So we would do well to constantly include the accounts of some of these men in our Bible reading to motivate us in areas of holiness.

In addition to the Scriptures, we can be alert for the few classic books that really motivate us to a holy and godly life. The number will probably not exceed a half dozen that uniquely meet our needs.² These books should be reread frequently just as I reread *Aerobics*. 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 is God who works in us to will and to act according to His good purpose. But we are expressly told by Paul to work at this ourselves (Philippians 2:12). Our responsibility regarding our wills is to guard our minds and emotions, 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.

NOTES: 1. In the *New International Version* the phrase from this verse reads, "Set your *heart* on things above." However, Paul evidently used *heart* here in its more limited meaning of affections or emotions, since in verse 2 he told us to set our minds — that is, our

intellect — on things above. Thus he exhorted us to set both our affections and our reason on spiritual values.

2. The list of books which uniquely meet each person's needs will of course vary. My own list will not necessarily motivate the reader, but, for whatever it is worth, it includes *Romans: An Exposition of Chapter 6* — *The New Man* by D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, and *Temptation and Sin* by John Owen (both previously cited in this book); and two other short, readable books: *Power Through Prayer* by E. M. Bounds (Zondervan), and *The Life of Robert Murray McCheyne* by Andrew Bonar (Banner of Truth Trust). I must say, however, that day-in and day-out the Scriptures themselves motivate me more to holiness than all the books in my library.