

RENEWING OUR WILL

Colossians 3:1-17

Thought, feeling, and will give rise to character.¹

- Dallas Willard -

Thus far we have discovered that those becoming like Jesus will have a *thought life* that is centered on God; *setting the mind on things above* and *letting the Word of Christ dwell in us richly*. Those becoming like Jesus will also increasingly enjoy the positive feelings that accompany love, joy, and peace.

Becoming like Jesus also includes the transformation of our wills. Our will is the executive center of our lives. It is the power to choose and to create. Its primary power is to select what we think about and what we do in response to our thoughts and feelings.

The interplay between our mind (thoughts and feelings) and our will is important to understand. In the moment of choosing, our will is completely dependent upon the thoughts and feelings guiding it *in that moment*. The thoughts and feelings cannot be changed in that moment. Thus, our will is completely dependent upon our mind *in the moment of choosing*.

But our thoughts and feelings are dependent upon our will if they are to change. By means of our will we choose to *rethink* our thoughts and feelings. If we are not pleased with our choices, we can change our thoughts and feelings to make different and better choices.

Let's say we hurt someone we love by screaming at them in anger. Later, in a time of reflection, we are remorseful and decide we do not want to be the kind of person who screams and hurts people. It will not be enough to say, "I won't do that again." Without changing the thoughts and feelings behind our screaming, we most certainly will do it again. If we want to respond differently our thoughts and feelings must change. It is our will deciding to *rethink* the situation that will bring about change.

In 2004 we bought our van brand new; the first new car I have ever owned. I reacted with less than godliness on the occasion of its first dent! Reflecting on my tantrum I decided I didn't want to be a person who valued possessions more than people. I went through a thought process in which I adjusted my expectations for the van accepting that dents and scratches are inevitable. I thought about the fact that the person who dented it did not do it out of malice or carelessness; they felt terrible about it. I thought about the fact that I will want grace when I'm the one putting the dent in the van. I got my mind clear that loving my family is far more important than a paint job. And I can say that many dents and scratches later, I have responded kindly and with good humor.

¹ Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart: Putting on the Character of Christ* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002), 145.

So we understand this interplay between the will and the mind. In the heat of the moment the will is dependent upon the mind. If the mind needs to change, it is dependent upon the will to decide to rethink things.

Our thoughts, feelings, and will give rise to our character. As our thoughts and feelings follow certain courses they lead to habitual actions that over time form our character. Someone has written:

Sow a thought, reap an action.

Sow an action, reap a habit.

Sow a habit, reap a character.

Sow a character, reap a destiny.

God created us with a will so that, like Him, we might be creators of good. But since the Fall, our will has been turned inward and given over to self-centeredness. As Dallas Willard writes:

The question, “What good can I bring about?” is replaced by
“How can I get my way?”²

– Dallas Willard –

Transparency, sincerity, and goodwill are replaced by manipulation, deception, and intimidation as we seek not God’s will, but our own.

Why doesn’t God force us to do what is right and good and spare the world the horrific pain and suffering we bring on ourselves?

Because that would be contrary to the very thing for which He created us: a freely chosen character. The human will is the one thing in His creation that God chooses *not* to override and force to take on a specific character. He treats us with dignity. He allows us to exercise our will and to go our own way. God is looking for those who freely want Him and want Him to be God over their lives.

Consider the exchange between God and Cain in Genesis 4:1-7.

Genesis 4:1-7

God affirmed Cain had a choice. He also warned Cain that choosing his will over God’s would open the door to sin’s consuming control. That remains true to the present. We do have choice, but we cannot choose not to experience the consequences of our choices. Unfortunately for many of us it is only after we hit bottom that we come to the place where we begin to really want God’s will.

Thankfully, God loves us so much He stands ready and willing to come to us when we turn our hearts to Him in any degree.

And when the heart truly reaches out to God as God, no longer looking to itself or others, he responds with the gift of “life from above.”³

² Ibid. 145.

- Dallas Willard -

Dallas Willard quotes Edith Schaeffer:

No great sophistication or information about God is required to be reached by God. Edith Schaeffer tells of a man from the Lisu tribe far out in the hills back of China. There was in him a great longing for a God he did not know. One day he found on a mountain path a page torn from a Lisu catechism. He read: "Are there more gods than One?"—"No, there is only One God." "Should we worship idols?"—"No ..." And the rest was torn away.

He went home and destroyed his altars. Immediately his daughter became very ill and his neighbors taunted him for making the demons angry. The man thought if there was one true God perhaps he could reach that God with his voice. He knew nothing about prayer, but he climbed to the top of the highest peak in the vicinity—twelve or fourteen thousand feet high—and shouted out, "Oh, God, if You really are there and You are the One I am to worship, please make my little girl well again."

It took a long time to climb back down, but upon arriving home he found the little girl completely well, with no time of recuperation needed. She had recovered at the time he had prayed. That man became an effective evangelist across the entire area. Edith Schaeffer comments: "There will be so many stories to compare with [this man's] that I picture us taking thousands of years to find out about them all."⁶ This is because of the seeking God who constantly "monitors" hearts.⁴

In becoming like Jesus in the dimension of our will we move through several stages. First there is surrender.

Surrender

In surrender we recognize God's supremacy intellectually and we concede to submit to Him in practice, but we don't necessarily like it or submit to it in all areas. But if we persist we will experience His grace and goodness and this will move us to abandonment.

Abandonment

Abandonment is full surrender to God's will. Here, we no longer hold back any part of ourselves from His will. In abandonment we come to rest in God's goodness particularly in the midst of trials. We accept that cancer, unemployment or the death of a loved one is within God's plan for good (Romans 8:28). The peace we experience in the midst of suffering moves us through abandonment to contentment with God's will.

Contentment

³ Ibid. 149.

⁶ Edith Schaeffer, *Affliction* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1978), p. 126–127.

⁴ Ibid. 149–150.

Contentment comes when we are completely convinced that no matter what our lot in life, God is always good and will always do what is good and right for us. From contentment we move into freely chosen participation in accomplishing God's will in the world.

Participation

Here we join God in the challenging drama of bringing people out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of light – of making disciples. This is not something “we have to do”, but it is a privilege *we get to do*.

If it is your desire to do the will of God, begin with what God has *said* is His will. Our core passage has many examples.

Colossians 3:1-17

We are to put to death malice (will to harm) and lying. Obedience to God's will regarding malice and lying is of far greater importance than generally realized.

*Who does not know, for example, that it is God's will we should be without guile and malice? Then let us decide never to mislead people and never to do or say things merely to cause pain or harm. Let us decide that today, right now, we will not do such things. You might think that this is a very small part of identifying with God's will. But in fact lying and malice are foundational sins. They make possible and actual many other sins. If you removed them, the structure of evil in the individual and in society would be very largely eliminated. From family fights and breakups to warfare, the human landscape would be transformed beyond recognition.*⁵

The decision to do the will of God is accomplished by renewing our thoughts and feelings through saturation with the Word of God and the illumination of the Holy Spirit. Share your desire with your discipler or a trusted friend and enlist their prayer support.

Those with a well-kept heart (will) are persons who are prepared for and capable of responding to the situations of life in ways that are good and right.⁶

~ Dallas Willard ~

⁵ Ibid. 155.

⁶ Ibid. 29.