



GOD'S LIVING WILL

Sermon by Richard J. Hull, II



SCRIPTURES

- Ephesians 1
- Luke 6

In the spring of 1969 during my junior year in college, I served as a student interim pastor of a rural church. One Sunday, I made some comment about accepting that death is part of life.

A nursing student in that congregation called me the next week and asked me to participate in a panel of experts to talk about what we now call “the right to die.” There I was, 20 years old, on stage with a compassionate nun, an experienced priest and a medical doctor talking about medical matters and matters of life and death, as if I had some idea of what I was talking about. I didn’t.

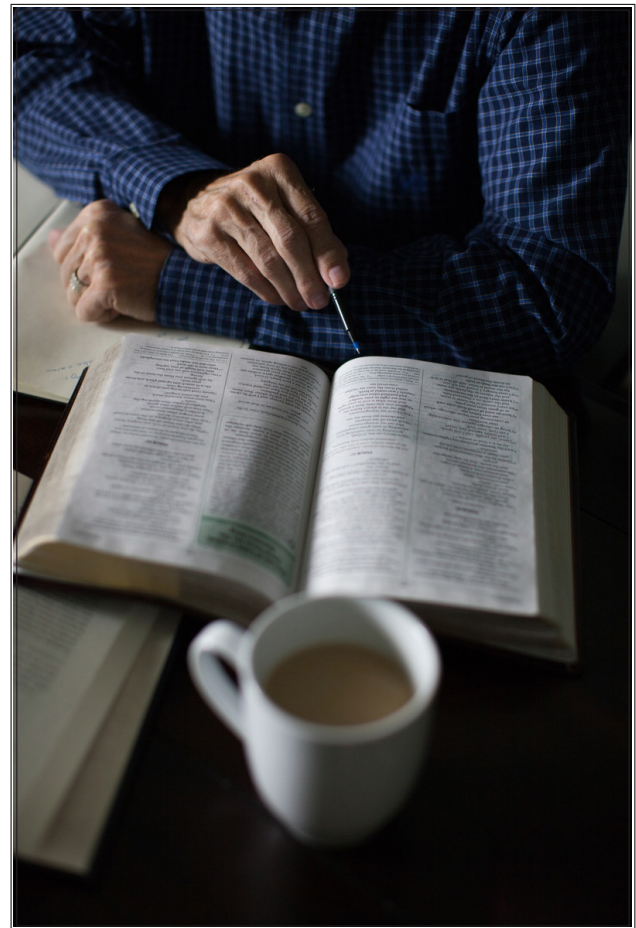
I would no more speak on such a panel in public today than I would discuss rocket science. It isn’t that I know less than I did then. I now know how much I don’t know.

The issue back then was sustaining life on a respirator. To turn it off or not to turn it off; that was the question. Over the years, that issue has been fairly well resolved.

Respirators are used well to bridge a person from illness to health, but most of us have come to accept that sometimes life should be allowed to take its course even if that course is death.

This whole issue has created a new legal document that is commonly called a “Living Will”.

They read something like this: “I willfully and voluntarily make known my desire that my dying not be artificially prolonged under the circumstances set forth, and if my attending or treating physician and another consulting





physician have determined that there is no reasonable medical probability of my recovery from such condition, I direct life-prolonging procedures be withheld or withdrawn when the application of such procedures would serve only to prolong artificially the process of dying.”

Many of us who are gathered here today, remembering loved ones, faced these issues in the past year or two. Coming here today brings us joy as we rejoice in memories of that loved one, and hope as we celebrate Christ’s victory over death.

But let’s be honest, a tear of sadness returns also. We are to be commended for the days and months, even years of grieving that we have endured. We have cast our burden upon the Lord, and he has sustained us. Tears and sadness are part of God’s care. They are expressions of love.

Perhaps the death that you faced was a difficult one. If you were aided in any of your decisions by a pastor, a friend or doctor, tell someone about it. And if your loved one had a living will, legally signed or discussed intimately with you, tell people about that also.

A will, any will is a device to describe how we want things to go in the future. In addition to “living wills” that strive to direct our “end of life” future, we also have “property” wills which tell how we want our resources distributed among our heirs in the future.

If you don’t have a “property” will, get one!

In this age of anti-government sentiment, the fact is that if you don’t have a will and you leave assets, the government will decide how they are distributed.

And I urge you to consider the church in your will. We have celebrated the endowment funds of this congregation today, funds created by saints of this congregation. Thanks to the saints, our church’s mission has prospered through those funds.

But, in addition to living and property wills, there is what I would call our “personal” will.

A personal will is an attempt to control things in the future over which we have no real control. You often hear sportscasters talk about an athlete’s “will to win.”

Bobby Knight, the infamous Indiana basketball coach used to say, “Everyone has a will to win; what most people lack is a will to practice.”

In the book of Ephesians, we hear Paul describe a way of understanding what could be called “God’s Living Will”.

God has a will; an intent, a desire. And that will is made known according to Chapter 1, “In Christ.” Some dozen times in one chapter, the author uses the phrase, “In Christ.”





Before we look at that passage, let me quickly summarize: There are three distinctions about the will of God:

1. God's Intentional Will– God's desire and dream for all creation
2. God's Circumstantial Will– God's adaptations when circumstances change
3. God's Ultimate Will– toward which God moves in all circumstances

(Read Ephesians 1 and Comment beginning with v. 5 5)

“God destined us for adoption as God's children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of God's will.”

Because of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, I call it God's living will, and it was that we be God's children. The people in Ephesus and also, you and me.

When my children were born, my wife and I created a will that said if something happened to us, Linda's sister would be their guardian. If that had happened, a judge would have made sure our will was carried out. So God's will that we be God's children was carried out by Jesus; Jesus is in a sense the trustee of God's will.

Verse 6: “To the praise of God's glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the beloved. God's will that we be God's children was by grace. We don't earn our



inheritance, it is given by God's kindness, grace. This is the way it is with all wills. What we inherit is by the grace of the benefactor. The means of grace, the way God's will was carried out was through Christ. By Christ's life, death and resurrection.

Next, Ephesians provides several references now to what has happened in Christ.

Verse 7: "In Christ, we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses." Redemption and forgiveness, similar but not the same.

Redemption: Set free, a slave granted freedom, was redeemed, a slave could be bought and declared to no longer be a slave. We could say that we have been slaves to sin and have been bought by blood.

Forgiveness: One can be a free person yet bound by the past. A prisoner set free still has a record that can be used against him.

Forgiveness overcomes the past. Let me explain it in terms of inheriting stocks that have a growth in value:

Bought Company ABC for \$100, and it is now worth \$1,000. If you were to sell that stock, it would be a redemption because it had usable worth.





However, under current tax laws, you would owe on the \$900 of profit or capital gain. Also, if you die and your child inherits the stock, they inherit it at what is called the stepped-up value or at \$1,000. No one owes tax on the \$900.

Your death forgives the tax that is due if the stock is redeemed.

By the way, this is a good way to make gifts to the church. Christianity talks about the will of God this way. Jesus is the expression of the will. Jesus both redeemed us and made us useful. And forgave us, responsibility for our “past taxes” is overcome.

Verse 8: “Jesus has made known to us the mystery of God’s will, . . . set forth in Christ, as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.”

God has shown us His will, intention, in Christ. In Christ, we have a plan for all time, and it is to gather up all things to God.

The author understands that we might think Christ is all about me. I’m saved, I’m redeemed, I’m forgiven. We need to remember we are, but one of the heirs of the living will of God.

God’s plan is to include all things. We are to be “In Christ.”

Don’t forget Luke 6: “Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, give to everyone who begs from you, do to others as you would have them do to you.”

We see that it’s not about me, it is about God.

Verse 9. “In Christ, we have obtained an inheritance . . .”

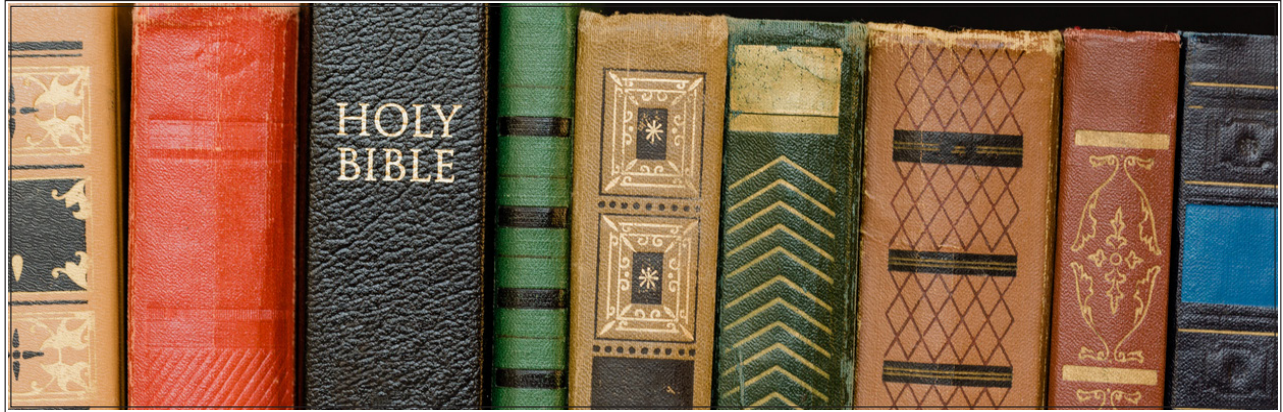
The passage continues the metaphor of adoption as children. One thing we get when we become a child is an inheritance.

I’m an only child. I got it all. My parents were gracious. But my inheritance was distributed long before my parent’s death.

Because of Christ’s death, by which we become God’s children, we are already receiving the inheritance. A difference is being made now.

I always understood that my inheritance from my parents was already paying dividends before they died. When my kids were small and I was earning a modest starting pastor’s salary, I had a sense that my inheritance was already in place.

If something would have happened to me, my parents would have seen to it that my kids were taken care of; they would have had a home and food and money for college.



The inheritance had value long before I received it. We have been adopted as Children of Christ, and we are already receiving the benefit of our inheritance.

In verse 14 it is called the pledge of our inheritance.

Knowing that we inherit the promise of life eternal makes a difference in our life here and now. I spend no time worrying about what happens to me when I die. God's living will experienced in the resurrection of Jesus has provided me eternal hope. And that hope keeps me from anxiety today and frees me to live in the way of Christ. I am already receiving my inheritance.

Verse 11: "In Christ, we have received the word of truth and been marked by the Holy Spirit."

When somebody dies, their will has to be handled properly. A process is followed to confirm that the document is in good order and uncontested; that it is true. Then it is properly sealed or recorded, filed in the office of the clerk.

Ephesians declares the Will of God is authenticated by the word of truth. Sealed or marked by the Holy Spirit.

God's will is God's destiny for us. God has made a living will. Like every will it needed a witness. That witness is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit affirms God has signed a living will for us. The Holy Spirit sees that the will has been signed properly and that God's mark is on God's will, and it is clear. And God's mark is the mark of a cross. The Cross becomes the signature on God's Living Will.



The Rev. Richard Hull is a retired Disciple pastor, serving Christian Churches in Pennsylvania, Indiana and Florida throughout his career. He has been an advocate for Legacy Fund policies in those congregations; gifts from Saints continue to help undergird and enhance those congregations' witnesses.