

## **MISSION: Prayer 13**

### **“Abandonment”**

There is a progression to prayer and our spiritual lives in general. We aren't supposed to stay spiritual babies, or even adolescents. We're called to grow up in the faith and help others do so as well. But while we've touched on many of the ideas associated with this growth, it's hard to wrap our minds around it all and keep everything straight. Vocal, meditative, and contemplative prayer? The Purgative, Illuminative, and Unitive Ways? Grace and freedom? There are a lot of moving parts.

So I want to give you the key - the simple secret that will propel you through the stages of prayer and the spiritual life like a rocket. In addition to the "normal" things we're supposed to do - Mass as often as we can, frequent confession, deep prayer - there is a key to the spiritual life that is so simple it's almost laughable. (Drum roll, please.) The secret to getting what God has prepared for us from before all time is wrapped up in one word - abandonment.

"Abandonment? Sounds almost like something I can get arrested for, Matt." It does, doesn't it? But I'm not talking about abandoning your dog, your car, or your child. I'm talking about abandoning yourself. Abandoning yourself into the hands of the God who made you. Abandoning yourself to the God who holds your very being in existence right now. Abandoning yourself to the God who out of complete humility became one of us to suffer and die so we can have the opportunity to live in happiness forever.

Nobody loves us more than God. Which means we need to start believing him. We need to let go and let God. It's all about trustful surrender to divine providence. This is the core of Christianity. But we need to understand abandonment correctly (so you don't get arrested).

Abandonment to God's will doesn't mean sitting back and doing nothing. It's not a spiritual chill pill. Sound reason cannot be ignored when trying to figure out what God wants us to do. Use your brain. Use your friend's brain. Use anybody's brain that can help you find the way. God gave us intelligence for a reason.

## ***Finding Gods Will***

Discerning the will of God isn't a free-for-all. There are definite guidelines, starting points from which we begin our discernment. There are essentially two categories of God's will. We'll call them God's "revealed will" and his "permissive will." The first kind is clear, the second not as much.

The revealed will of God is what he's already told us he wants us to do. It's pretty straightforward. "Thou shalt," and "Thou shalt not." (They don't call them the Ten Commandments for nothing.) Of course, not even the Bible tells us everything we're supposed to do. But God didn't just give us a book. He gave us a living Church through which he guides his people. If a choice we make is not in line with the teaching of the Church, we've made the wrong choice. It's that simple. We've gone against the will of God, and we'll suffer the consequences.

The first and most obvious way to follow God's will is to stay out of mortal sin. From there we attack our venial, less serious, sins through the sacraments, prayer, and other means we've discussed in these pages. That's not the end of the revealed will of God, though. Obeying God's will also means taking care of the duties that go along with our state in life.

If you have a family, for example, they are part of God's revealed will for your life. In fact, they are your first duty. Your family even comes before your own private prayers and devotions. Family trumps just about everything. This doesn't mean, however, you're to neglect your private devotions, job, or even other people due to obligations to your family. The family has a prior claim, but not an exclusive claim, on our time. We have other duties and obligations that must be taken care of, too. (If I don't work, they don't eat!)

## ***Permission Granted***

God's revealed will is just one side of the coin, though. We all know there are decisions we face in life that aren't answered clearly in Church teaching or determined by our station in life. Additionally, there are many things that just plain happen to us, things over which we have no control. These fall under the category of God's permissive will. And, frankly, it confuses a lot people who wonder why bad stuff is happening. "Why would God do this to me?" They think God is

punishing them for some reason when they didn't even do anything wrong — that they can remember, anyway. To understand this a little better, we have to go back to our previous discussion of grace and providence.

Remember, we said everything that happens is ultimately God's will because nothing can happen without God's power? He holds everything in existence, and no one can act without him. That means that, except for our sinful actions, everything that happens to us is part of God's permissive will. He permits it to happen. Even the consequences of our sins (not the sin itself) are willed by God, who sees them as opportunities to further his divine plan for our life. "Padre," you're thinking, "that sounds a bit harsh, doesn't it? Why would he do that?" Because he knows how to write straight with crooked lines.

Don't misunderstand. It's not God's plan, for example, that someone hurts you through sinful action. But he may let it happen because he knows how to bring good out of it. "We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him" (Rom 8:28).

Truth be told, often he allows misfortune in order to purify us, to get our "self" out of the picture. Too much self leaves too little room for God. Father Walter Ciszek, a Jesuit missionary to Russia in the middle of the twentieth century, was imprisoned by the Soviets for twenty-three years. Intolerable conditions, solitary confinement, torture, psychological degradation, hard labor - his ordeal was horrific.

What I found fascinating about his story was the progression of his prayer life and general relationship with God during this tribulation. For years after it all began, he describes his attitude as one of independence. He thanked God for the attributes he had received which would help him to endure hardship and perhaps even convert his captors. His focus was on others, figuring they were the only ones who needed change. This lasted for years. But things got progressively worse, and after intense suffering he finally succumbed to repeated attempts by the Soviets to procure his signed confession for crimes he didn't commit. Crushed and ashamed, he eventually began to realize he had tried to do too much on his own - and failed. He wasn't really praying for God's will to be done, just for what he thought God's will

should be. What follows is the moving account of a broken man who learns complete reliance on God, regardless of his unjust circumstances:

He was asking of me an act of total trust, allowing for no interference or restless striving on my part, no reservations, no exceptions, no areas where I could set conditions or seem to hesitate.... Once understood, it seemed so simple. I was amazed it had taken me so long in terms of time and of suffering to learn this truth.<sup>68</sup>

God transformed Father Cizek's life through the terribly sinful actions of others. After so many years of serving Our Lord, this awful series of events in his life led to what he unashamedly calls a new "conversion experience ... a death and resurrection."

As powerfully as he works through bad circumstances, not everything in God's permissive will has to do with negative things. Lots of things he allows are really great. He's our Father who loves to shower us with gifts and see us happy. As Jesus said: "If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" (Mt 7:11).

### ***Lemonade Out of Lemons***

Abandonment to divine providence is more than simply accepting what comes our way. True abandonment sees right through every situation to the holy hand of God, sure that he's guiding us to glory. It recognizes providence in every joy, sickness, or disappointment and embraces it. It's actively living what we pray in the Our Father - "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

This doesn't mean we embrace calamity, illness, or other foul situations without any further action. Embracing God's will doesn't mean we fail to work for the improvement of our circumstances. It may be God's will that you're sick, but that doesn't mean you should refuse to take your medicine. Again, use your brain. In so doing we're actually living the will of God, using the gifts he gave us.

We have a natural aversion to suffering, so embracing it can be tough. I realize that. I often have a hard time not complaining about even trivial things. But there's no room for whining once we realize God must have allowed, for example, that rainy

day on our family vacation. (Though it's hard not to whine when Disney World charges a small fortune for a plastic garbage bag they label "rain poncho" just because there's a hole in the middle and a picture of a mouse on the front.) Why shouldn't we complain? Because God must have allowed that rain for a reason. Maybe a local farmer was desperate for rain. Maybe some soccer mom just couldn't handle driving to yet another practice that day. Maybe he wanted to give me an opportunity for growth - to not complain. Who knows? God does.

Regardless of the situation, as bad as it might appear, God is working. Yes, he wants us to be happy in the here and now, but his overarching concern is for our eternal salvation. We can't see all the parts in motion like he does. Embrace what happens even if you don't like it on a natural level. (Though lots of times you will.) Like any good parent, God's far more interested in preparing us for the future. He always has our eternal destination in mind. He knows what he's doing.

How many times have you told someone, "Trust me" when they questioned you? That's what God is saying to us at every moment: "Trust me. I gave you your very breath and love you more than you can possibly fathom. Trust me. I sent my only Son to die so you could live. Trust me. I want you to have inconceivable bliss and ecstasy with me forever. Trust me!" Abandonment to divine providence leads us to live as true children, completely trusting the goodness of the Father. It's the only way to find true peace and interior joy.

We are on a lifetime journey to God. And there is nothing in this passing world worth a detour. Get on the path to God and don't get off. Life is too short to take the long route because you may never get where you need to be. When someone asked St. John Vianney how best to get to God, he replied, "Quite straight, like a cannonball."

So fire away, because our union with God doesn't happen later. It starts right now. Remember, the goal is to "get in touch with Jesus as early as possible in the spiritual life in each of its exercises, especially that of prayer, and to keep in touch with Him by all possible means and at all costs."

This deep relationship with God is what we were made for. It's the only thing that will ever satisfy you. So pray for wisdom. Pray for grace. Pray to live. Why? Because prayer works!