

# Evergreen Presbyterian Church

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**Sermon Title:** Not My Will

**Sermon Text:** Matthew 26:36-46

**Matt. 26:36** ¶ Then Jesus went with them to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to his disciples, “Sit here, while I go over there and pray.”

**Matt. 26:37** And taking with him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, he began to be sorrowful and troubled.

**Matt. 26:38** Then he said to them, “My soul is very sorrowful, even to death; remain here, and watch with me.”

**Matt. 26:39** And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, “My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.”

**Matt. 26:40** And he came to the disciples and found them sleeping. And he said to Peter, “So, could you not watch with me one hour?”

**Matt. 26:41** Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak.”

**Matt. 26:42** Again, for the second time, he went away and prayed, “My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.”

**Matt. 26:43** And again he came and found them sleeping, for their eyes were heavy.

**Matt. 26:44** So, leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words again.

**Matt. 26:45** Then he came to the disciples and said to them, “Sleep and take your rest later on. See, the hour is at hand, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners.

**Matt. 26:46** Rise, let us be going; see, my betrayer is at hand.”

**Main Point:** Because Jesus Christ has both a human nature and a divine nature, we can understand our own salvation, and the wrestling prayer of Jesus.

**Outline:**

1. The Natures of Jesus
2. The Prayers of Jesus

**Introduction**

If you know much about church history, you know that great persecutions often arose against Christians and that this sometimes resulted in Christians being killed for their faith.

Almost immediately, a great respect began to arise in the church for those who were martyred. And I think we can all understand why that might be. Even the book of Hebrews points to the importance of those who give their life for the truths of Christ.

But there was another group that we might know less about. Whereas martyrs died for their faith, this other group were called “confessors” in the church. And confessors were those who were persecuted, who were tortured for their faith, but who refused to recant but they also weren’t killed. They survived their torture without recanting. We’re more familiar with martyrs than we are with confessors.

But today I want to tell you about one of the most famous confessors in church history – a fellow we call Maximus the Confessor. Maximus was a monk who lived in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. He was a defender of historic orthodox theology, and specifically

he defended an important view that I think we need to understand if we want to appreciate the wrestling that Jesus does in the garden in our passage today.

The byzantine emperor during the period of about 650 AD disagreed with Maximus' theology, put him on trial, and had him convicted of heresy. After the trial, Maximus was tortured. They cut his tongue out so he could not longer spread the scriptural teachings about Christ, and his right hand was cut off so that he could no longer promulgate his views by writing.

Now, even though Maximus was tortured because of his views, he was eventually vindicated. The sixth ecumenical council in 680 AD declared that Maximus was correct after all. He was vindicated, and the emperor was wrong to put him to death.

However, Maximus never lived to see his vindication. A few months after he was tortured, he died in exile. But because he stood up under torture, he received the title of confessor, which he is still known by today.

Today, I'm going to lean on Maximus for his help here. Because the thing that got Maximus persecuted is precisely the issue that will help us understand today's passage. Now, I should say, it's not only Maximus, but the confessions and councils of the church of which we are a part that I'm appealing to. But Maximus will still be our guide and help as we think about the first part of today's passage.

Last week, we focused on the call to pray that Jesus gave to his disciples. Today we're going to look at how Jesus prays.

There are two things I want us to see about Jesus' prayer here. First, the natures of Jesus. And Second, the prayers of Jesus.

## **1. The Natures of Jesus**

First, today, the natures of Jesus.

Before we talk about the two natures of Jesus, I want you to see the context for all of this: Jesus wrestled in prayer. In verse 38 Jesus says,

“My soul is very sorrowful, even to death.”

Then in verse 39 it says,

“Going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, saying, ‘My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.’”

So here is the question: what on earth is happening here? Isn't Jesus God? God only has one will. Jesus is God. Shouldn't he have the same will as the Father? Yet here he says that his will is distinct from the Father's will.

What is he doing talking about the Father having one will, and himself having another? Right?

So if we're going to understand the wrestling of Christ here, we will need to look to church history. And I want to ask for your indulgence here.

For this first point, I want to ask you to focus carefully and go with me on this. This might be more theology than you're used to me bringing into a sermon. For some of you, this next part may be challenging. But I do think we need to be willing to be stretched and challenged by God's word.

Back to Maximus.

Now, what was the teaching that got Maximus killed, that is going to help us today? The view that Maximus defended was a view that I'm going to name once, and I won't keep saying it over and over again, because it's a mouthful. But it was called “dyothelitism.” It means “two-wills.” But the meaning of what Maximus said is this: because Jesus is the God-Man – because Jesus is truly and fully God, and truly and fully man – each of his natures has its own will because a will is proper to a nature, and not a person.

Here's why that's important: If a will was proper to a person, then God would have three wills, because as a Trinity, he is three persons. But that would not be Christianity. It wouldn't be a monotheistic religion at all, because three wills in God would imply three Gods when we talk about the Trinity. The word for that is “tri-theism,” which is not Christianity at all. That is something Muslims misrepresent Christians as believing, but we absolutely abominate it. Because there is only one God, then God must have only one will.

Now, why should we care about this so far? Because – Maximus said – the Jesus who prays in our passage today is expressing two wills that are both natural to him.

And Maximus said, that if Jesus *only* had a divine will, or only had a human will, the prayer of Jesus in the garden that we see here would be only play-acting. He would be pretending to have two wills.

But Maximus pointed out that there's an even more serious problem: if Jesus has only one will, then the divine nature and the human nature have somehow mixed together in the person of Jesus. And if that took place in the incarnation, then our Savior isn't truly God. But he also isn't truly man. Instead, he would be some third type of being – a mixture of God and man into one new mutant nature. And such a sacrifice can't save humanity from our sins because he wouldn't have a real human nature, and his sacrifice wouldn't be sufficient to save because he wouldn't be truly and fully God.

Here was the insistence of the church fathers (and I would say of Scripture): that which has not been assumed by Christ in the incarnation cannot be healed. If he has not become truly and fully man, then men like you and me cannot be healed. And so Maximus was doing two things: he was saying, we need a Savior who is truly God and truly Man without compromise. But he also said, we need to be able to make sense of the prayer of Jesus in passages like this one.

We will struggle to see the depth of what is happening in this passage if we do not focus on the reality of his human will, and on the importance of the two wills in Christ. If we aren't willing to talk about this challenging issue, then we will struggle to see how profound Jesus' own wrestling in this situation is.

What theologians after the time of Maximus continued to refine was this idea that yes, there is a divine will and a human will in Christ. But always it is the incarnate *person* who does the willing. So they expressed it by saying that Christ had two natural wills, but exercised a single "personal" will. So it is always the person who wills, but he has two natural wills.

What does it mean that Jesus has a natural divine will? Well, let's start here: God is three persons, but has only one will, because God is not three beings but one being. He is not divided, but is perfectly and fully united in nature and purpose and activity. Though he is three persons, he is one being, and because he is one being he possesses one will. And because Jesus shares the same being and nature with God, he, through his divine nature, shares in this same will. He has the same will as the Father and Spirit.

Let me take it back to Scripture so you can see this isn't just speculation. A relevant passage for seeing that Jesus has a natural divine will is John 5:21:

“For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will.”

Here is what Maximus said about this passage:

“It is not possible to say that this refers to the human nature of Christ. Thus, the Savior taught us that just as the Father, being God, gives life to the dead by His will, so also the Son, being of identical essence and will with the Father, gives life to whom he will.”

So do you see what we have in passages like this? It's a passage where we can see that Jesus has the same will as the Father. The Father and Son share the same will because they share the same nature. They are united in being and purpose!

But if we read the New Testament we also see the reality of Christ's also having a natural human will. Besides today's passage, Maximus pointed to the human will of Christ in Hebrews 10:7-9:

“Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come to do your will, O God, as it is written of me in the scroll of the book.’”

When he said above, “You have neither desired nor taken pleasure in sacrifices and offerings and burnt offerings and sin offerings” (these are offered according to the law), then he added, ‘Behold, I have come to do your will.’”

Maximus, speaking of this passage:

“He thus delights to do the will of the Father, not according to his deity, but according to his humanity, for the Father’s will is also His will, since He is also God by essence.” (Disputation with Pyrrhus, 137).

Jesus has a human will, and a divine will. These are the two wills of the two natures of Jesus.

We need both of these wills in Christ, because without them, we don’t have a savior who is fully God and fully man. These are the stakes. This is why I’m belaboring this so much.

Okay. Let’s get out of this rocky terrain now and move into somewhat easier, smoother country now.

## **2. The Prayers of Jesus**

This leads to our second point today: the prayers of Jesus.

Everything we just discussed helps us understand what’s happening here as Jesus prays. Because in this passage Jesus says, “Here’s what my will is, as your incarnate, human son: If it’s possible, I want this cup to pass me by. I don’t want to drink it.” It’s a conditional statement. He’s not saying he won’t do it, he’s saying that what is coming *must* be the only way in order for him to do so; otherwise he wants the cup to pass. He has the same desire and the same goal between both his divine and human wills: the salvation of his people, and a perfect sacrifice and rescue for God’s people.

As Maximus said in another place, “His will in no way contradicts God,” but instead the will of Jesus is in harmony with God’s will.

While Jesus recognizes the pain of what is coming, in a human sense he fears it, but he also loves the plan of rescuing sinners by his death. In this prayer, then, he fears the path, but never disagrees with that path or of the destination.

Here’s the thing: if the Monothelites are correct and Christ does not have two wills, then we cannot make sense of this passage, nor can we make sense of how the death of Jesus saves sinners to begin with. He prays “not my will, but your

will,” but how is that possible if he’s got the same will? The answer is, it’s not possible unless it’s play-acting.

Now, all of that is background to understand: Jesus wrestles in prayer here. And the wrestling seems to be this: living in conformity with the Father’s will. And the answer as to how Jesus will resolve that is found in prayer.

Here is what Calvin says:

“[Jesus prays here even though] he asks a thing that is impossible to be granted to him; for the prayers of believers do not always flow on with uninterrupted progress to the end, do not always maintain a uniform measure, are not always arranged even in a distinct order, but, on the contrary, are involved and confused, and either oppose each other, or stop in the middle of the course; like a vessel tossed by tempests, which, though it advances towards the harbor, cannot always keep a straight and uniform course, as in a calm sea. We must remember, indeed...that Christ had not confused emotions, like those to which we are accustomed...but, so far as the pure and innocent nature of man could admit, he was struck with fear and seized with anguish, so that, amidst the violent shocks of temptation, he wavered... from one wish to another. This is the reason why, after having prayed to be freed from death, he immediately restrains himself, and, submitting to the authority of the Father, corrects and recalls that wish which had suddenly escaped him.” (Calvin, Matt. 26:39)

There is something wild and emotional in the prayer of Jesus here. He is a man, but he is a man in an impossible and sorrowful situation. And this thing is coming. Jesus shows us something about our own prayer lives here, I think: that part of prayer is sometimes a wrestling to align our will with God’s will. We know what God wants, but we often don’t want to experience what God’s will involves.

We want to grow in holiness. But the way God grows us is through painful experiences. We want what God wants, but we don’t want to suffer. Part of prayer is accepting the suffering is the path to making us holy.

We are praying by the bedside of a loved one whose end appears to be near. Part of what we pray for is that God would align our will with his: that like



Jesus here we would accept the will of God, even when it is not the choice we would make, were it up to us.

Praying like Jesus does here means we entrust ourselves to his wisdom. We entrust ourselves to his goodness. We know that he can be depended on and that his will is greater than ours. Jesus shows us this.

Look what happens as a result of the prayer: Jesus' desire not to drink the cup is real. But he has a greater love for the plan of God to save sinners than his own comfort. And that desire not to drink the cup seems to lift after his first prayer. Because he returns in verse 42 and again prays, but now the prayer is changed:

“Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, your will be done.”

The prayer changes. Rather than expressing resistance to what's coming, he expresses his willingness over the course of prayer.

Think of last week: Jesus told us to pray that we not fall into temptation. Here Jesus is showing what it looks like to pray that *he* may not enter into temptation. He's modeling the very thing he wanted his disciples to be doing last week.

What has prayer done here? One commentator suggests this: that “[b]etween the first and second periods of prayer, the focus [seems to] have shifted from the horrors that Jesus would endure to the horrors that his followers will endure if he does *not* drink the cup on their behalf” (Quarels). For one who loves his people, the only thing worse than drinking the cup is if his people would have to drink the cup, which was unthinkable to a Savior who knows that of all those given to him he should lose none (John 6:39).

What we see here is endlessly precious: that Jesus walks into the fire because he loved you more than himself. He loved the Father more than himself. He loved God's will more than his own comfort. Understanding what is happening here amplifies what we see of the love of Christ for us.

Jesus prayed to God in a dark moment. He cried out in a moment of sorrow, where he knew sorrow was coming. And yet he resolved,

“your will be done.”

Will you resolve to pray that as well in your own life?

“Your will be done.”

That is not often easy. We saw this from Calvin a moment ago: our prayers in a dark season are often not composed and smooth and impressive. Instead, they are stuttering and frustrated and not ready for public consumption.

St. Augustine, talking about prayer said that we often *don't* know how to pray. He said, “we still know not what to pray for as we ought in regard to tribulations.” And Augustine points to this moment in Gethsemane, and he says that Jesus balances a prayer for a change of circumstances with a prayer for the strength to endure. And what Augustine says is that yes, we should pour out our heart's desire to God, but we should remember the wisdom and goodness of God even as we do that.

What do you need to commit to the Lord today?

Do you have something you can see on the horizon? Commit it to him. Commit it to his will.

Do you have something that you don't *know* for sure is coming, but you're anxious anyway? Commit it to him.

Follow the example of our Lord: pour your heart out. But remember who he is and submit yourself to his will, because you can trust him.

May we all be able to follow Jesus' lead here and say, “Not my will, but yours be done.”

*Let's pray.*