

Do It Yourself Religion

Genesis 16:1-10

Pastor Tom Anderson

C.S. Lewis once observed, “There are two kinds of people in this world. Those who speak to God and say, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God speaks and says, ‘All right, have it your way.’” Put the story of Sarai and Hagar into the “have it your way” people category.

God wants to teach us this morning about what it means to walk with him. He wants to teach us how to know his will and do his will. He wants us to experience his presence in our daily lives.

Sarai made two mistakes in this story (Genesis 16:1-10). First she confused the will of God with the circumstances of life. She looked at her barrenness and the passing of many years. She used this information to determine that it was not God’s will for her to have a child. She was wrong. Reading God’s will into the circumstances of life be it an open door or a closed door is not a substitute for having the will of God dwell in your heart. Often the will of God is for you to defy the circumstances of life be it barrenness, or old age, or unemployment or tragedy. When Peter was arrested, flogged and given a court order to shut up about Jesus, he responded to these circumstances by saying, “We must obey God rather than men!” (Acts 5:29) Don’t confuse the will of God with your circumstances.

Sarai’s second mistake was to confuse the will of God with popular opinion. The popular opinion was that it was perfectly up to standard to give your servant girl to sleep with your husband in order to bear children to your credit. Scholars tell us that this was an acceptable cultural practice in the ancient world. But from the story it is clearly unacceptable to God. Sarai and Abram read the will of God into popular opinion and they were wrong. Never confuse the will of God with the wishes of the majority. Often times the will of God for you is to defy the culture practices around you. Ephesians 5:3 puts it, “But among you there must not be any hint of sexual immorality or impurity...such things are improper for God’s holy people.”

Sarai and Abram are engaging in what I call “do-it-yourself-religion”. This is where we make up our own beliefs and our own ethics according to the current customs of the world. This kind of religion doesn’t have any sharp edges. It doesn’t have any high expectations. It is smooth and domesticated and it blends in very well with what everybody else is thinking and doing. Do-it-

yourself-religion emphasizes and centers on the human self instead of God. All the behavior in Genesis chapter 16 is self-centered. That is why God is absent in this story until the end—when he has to break like a firefighter breaks into a burning house to rescue the hapless participants in this soap opera household. That’s the first lesson: you can’t walk with God if you are centered on yourself. To experience God in your life, you must surrender to the will of God.

How much this story is like “The Fall” in Genesis 3. Like Adam and Eve, Abram and Sarai received a word from God. Like Eve, Sarai judges that word to be insufficient. So she takes the forbidden fruit and offers it to her husband in the form of Hagar. Like Adam, Abram plays the stooge, abdicates all thinking and complacently does what he is told. As with Adam and Eve, the immediate effect is that their eyes are opened to an ugly new reality. Their marriage has been dishonored and family strife engulfs their household. The abuse is so bad that this young, pregnant girl runs to life on the street. Now it looks like, Sarai’s big idea might result in a fatality. That’s where “do-it-yourself-religion” always leads: to death and despair.

There is a big difference between God’s purposes and our plans. Do it yourself religion focuses on our plans. We dream up what we’d like to do in life and then ask God to bless our plans. This isn’t what it means to walk with God. To walk with God means we submit ourselves to God’s purposes and wait faithfully for his leadership. Doing things God’s way is always best.

In 1850 Hugh Harrison and his family set out for California from Minneapolis. They were lured by the gold rush. But being deeply religious Methodists, they decided not to travel on Sundays. They kept Sunday as a strict day of rest and took time to read the Bible and worship together. Scores of wagons passed them and other travelers called them pious fools who would have all the gold on the streets of heaven but none of the gold of California because others would get there first. Nevertheless the Harrison wagon train not only caught up with all the others but eventually passed them and arrived first. All their animals and equipment were in sound and healthy condition because they rested every 7th day. God’s ways are always better than our own ideas and plans.

In Psalm 81:11-14 God says,

...my people would not listen to me; Israel would not submit to me. So I gave them over to their stubborn hearts to follow their own devices. If my people would but listen to me, if Israel would follow my ways, how quickly would I subdue their enemies...”

Abram and Sarai discovered there are two kinds of people in the world: those who say to God, “thy will be done” and those to whom God says, “All right, have it your way.” God gives

us the freedom to follow our own devices but if we do, we will also face the consequences he will let us have it our way and it won't be pretty.

Living God's purpose for your life is rarely a well-planned event. A cancer survivor said to me, "We want lives of simple, predictable ease—smooth, even trails as far as the eye can see—but God likes to go off-road."

Martin Luther never planned to lead the Reformation. The Reformation happened because Luther walked with God one step at a time. John Wesley never planned out the evangelical revival in England and America. The revival happened because Wesley walked with God one step at a time. If he had planned it all out, if he had woke up one morning with a project plan and a timetable for evangelical revival, it never would have happened. God doesn't work for us. God wants to work through us.

Many Christians, when they are faced with a ministry opportunity, a calling or a task given by God, respond with excuses. "I can't do it. I don't have the talent. I'm not strong enough, young enough, old enough, or wise enough." In one way or another, they say they just don't have what it takes to fill the bill for what God wants to do. But God already knows that! God knows you can't do it. God knew that Sarai couldn't have a baby on her own. God doesn't want us to do things for him; God wants to do things through us. Philippians 2:13 says, "For it is God who works in you to will and to act according to his good purpose." God didn't want Sarai to do it all on her own. God wanted Sarai to let him work in her and through her.

Genelle McMillan was the last person to be rescued from Ground Zero alive. She had been trapped in the rubble of the Twin Towers for 27 hours when at last fire fighters heard her calling and pulled her out. She had been raised Christian but had fallen away from the faith. Pinned in the rubble that all changed and she began to pray over and over again, "Please God save my life. Give me a second chance. I promise I will change my life and do your will." And God did. God gave Abram, Sarai and Hagar a second chance. God will do it for you and your family, too. McMillan's story tells us that deep down inside we all know the crucial issue is to surrender our lives to God and say, "thy will be done."