

Is the “Will of the Father” a Life of Obedience?

By Bob Wilkin

INTRODUCTION

My friend, Dr. Jody Dillow, a leading Free Grace theologian, does not believe that the expression *the will of the Father* in Matt 7:21 refers to believing in Christ. That's because he understands entering the kingdom here as a special reward of *abundant kingdom entrance* that only overcoming saints will receive.

Dillow describes the will of the Father in Matt 7:21 in this way, “It should be obvious to any unbiased reader that the calls to enter the kingdom are conditioned upon works” (*Final Destiny*, p. 228). A bit later he adds, “In the context of the Sermon on the Mount to do the ‘will of the Father’ means to obey the teaching of the sermon” (p. 273; see also p. 303, “ethical adherence to the Sermon’s precepts...surpassing righteousness”).

Dillow acknowledges that it is possible that *the will of the Father* refers to believing in His Son: “While ‘doing the will of the Father’ could possibly refer to believing in Christ for salvation (John 6:39), in the immediate context this refers to obeying the precepts of the Sermon on the Mount” (p. 302). In the latest (9th) edition of *Final Destiny*, he says that the will of the Father refers to believing in Christ for everlasting life “once in John” (p. 306).

In *Final Destiny*, when discussing this issue, Dillow mentions me and others who hold that the will of the Father is believing in the Son. He suggests that we do so “without any proof” (p. 306). I welcome the challenge to prove my view. In this article I will give seven proofs that the will of the Father in Matt 7:21 is believing in His Son for everlasting life.

SEVEN PROOFS THAT THE WILL OF THE FATHER IN MATTHEW 7:21 REFERS TO BELIEVING IN CHRIST

The seven proofs are simple and compelling.

First, the Lord here speaks of entering the kingdom and the simplest understanding is that's what He meant. It is hard to imagine any of Jesus' listeners thinking of entering the kingdom as not referring to entering the kingdom, but instead to *richly entering it*. When the Apostle Peter, three decades later, wished to refer to a *rich* kingdom entrance he did not speak of merely *entering* the kingdom. Instead, he said, “for so an entrance will be supplied to you *abundantly* into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet 1:11, emphasis added). Since the Lord is talking about kingdom entrance, then the will of the Father here refers to believing in the Son.

Second, the connection between Matt 7:15-20 and Matt 7:21-23 shows that *unbelievers* are in view. The former speaks of false prophets (v 15) who are known by their fruits, i.e., their words, their false teachings (cf. Matt 12:33-36 where *fruit* is identified as *words*). The latter also speaks of people who claim to prophesy in Jesus' name (v 22). It is reasonable to equate the false prophets of vv 15-20 with those

claiming to prophesy in Jesus' name in v 22. I see no evidence that the Lord is saying that the false prophets of vv 15-20 are born again. Indeed, there is no mention of faith in Christ anywhere in Matt 7:15-23. To suggest that these are unfaithful believers being excluded from kingdom reward is not suggested by the context.

Third, that these people profess *works* in a judgment related to kingdom entrance suggests they are unbelievers. Is not the sole condition of entering the kingdom faith in Christ? Is not their basis of assurance totally wrong? These people have failed the second question in the Evangelism Explosion program ("Why should God let you into His heaven?").

Fourth, the Lord's words, "I never knew you" suggest that these people had never come to faith in Him and hence they did not have everlasting life.

Fifth, "that day" most naturally refers to the Great White Throne Judgment of unbelievers (Rev 20:11-15), not the Judgment Seat of Christ where believers will be judged (2 Cor 5:9-11). If this refers to the Judgment Seat of Christ as Dillow suggests, then where is the evidence? Unlike the parables of the minas (Luke 19:11-27) and talents (Matt 25:14-30), those being judged are not called Jesus' servants. Indeed, the Lord specifically denies knowing them. This suggests lack of relationship, not lack of fellowship. Nor is the issue of ruling over cities mentioned here. It seems much more likely that the Great White Throne Judgment is in view. Indeed, there seems to be no indication that the Bema is in view.

Sixth, we know from many other texts that the will of the Father is that people believe in His Son. This is easily seen in John 6:39-40: "This is the will of the Father who sent Me, that of all He has given Me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up at the last day. And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day." Here we see the will of the Father concerning Jesus and concerning us. *With respect to kingdom entrance*, the will of the Father for humans is that we must believe in the Lord Jesus for everlasting life, and His will for His Son is that He must guarantee the eternal destiny of all who believe in Him.

The same idea is seen in John 5:24-30. The will of the Father concerning Jesus is stated in v 30: "I do not seek My own will but the will of the Father who sent Me." In context, that *will* is giving everlasting life to those who believe in Him: "He who hears My word *and believes in Him who sent Me* has everlasting life, and shall not come into judgment, but has passed from death into life" (John 5:24, emphasis added). To believe in Jesus is to believe in the Father who sent Him to proclaim the promise of life. John 5:24 shows that the will of the Father is to believe in His Son. Jesus' listeners claimed to believe in the Father while at the same time they rejected Him. That is impossible, the Lord is saying. To believe the Father requires believing in the Son whom He sent since it is the Father's will that people believe in His Son.

Seventh, one must do the will of the Father, whatever that is, in order to have this promised kingdom entrance, whatever that is. It is not enough to do part of the will of the Father. A person who kept most of the will of the Father, but failed in one point, would be guilty of not doing the Father's will. Isn't that what Jas 2:10 says, "For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all"? See also Gal 3:10. To fail in one point of the law is to fail the entire law. Only if the will of the Father is believing in His Son can anyone actually do the will of the Father.

AN EVALUATION OF FOUR ARGUMENTS THAT THE WILL OF THE FATHER IN MATTHEW 7:21 REFERS TO A LIFE OF OBEDIENCE

Dillow gives four reasons why he is convinced that the will of the Father in Matt 7:21 concerns a life of obedience, not faith in Christ.

First, Dillow says, "They proclaim a heartfelt, 'Lord, Lord'" (p. 302). Then he reasons that since these people call Jesus "Lord," they are probably believers: "In view of the fact that Paul said no one can make such a heartfelt confession except by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:3), a possible interpretation of this verse suggests that these people are regenerate" (p. 302).

While he agrees the false prophets of Matt 7:15-20 are unregenerate, he says, "Starting in v 21 the scene changes" (p. 302). Several pages later, Dillow does go on to say that the prophets in Matt 7:22 are false prophets too, but he calls them "false Christian prophets" (pp. 307-308; see also p. 300). He cites a passage from the *Didache*, an early Christian writing, which warned about false Christian prophets (pp. 307-308).

But 1 Cor 12:3 cannot possibly mean that whoever says the words, “Lord, Lord,” or “Jesus is Lord” is born again. Obviously most Evangelicals have said those words many times. So do Catholics, Mormons, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Are they probably believers? No. Any intelligent person, believer or unbeliever, would use those words to address the Lord Jesus at the Great White Throne Judgment.

The word *heartfelt* is not found in Matt 7:21. While it is possible they said the words “Lord, Lord” with great emotion and conviction, there is no way of knowing that.

All Paul was saying is that any honest confession that Jesus is Lord is the result of the Spirit revealing that to a person. Unbelievers can believe Bible truths, and if they do so, it is because the Spirit has done a work in their lives. This first argument is a non-starter.

Second, Dillow argues the expression “‘the will of the Father’ never means ‘believe on Christ for salvation’ in Matthew, and only once in John” (p. 306). But if it refers to believing in Jesus at least once in John, then why could it not also mean that in Matt 7:21, especially in a context dealing with kingdom entrance or exclusion (cf. “depart from Me” in v 23)?

John 6:39-40 is a passage which is widely understood to teach that the will of the Father is to believe in His Son. This is the one passage which Dillow is convinced equates the will of the Father with believing in His Son (pp. 302, 305-306). It says, “For this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life...”

Dillow’s second argument is unconvincing. If we agree that the expression sometimes refers to believing in Jesus (I would say many times, but even one clear example is enough), then one cannot prove it doesn’t mean that in Matt 7:21 by appealing to the expression.

Third, he suggests that since the Lord does not question their three claims, then they indeed did works that only regenerate people could do (p. 303). Dillow suggests, for example, that unbelievers could not cast out demons (p. 303).

The fact that Matthew does not tell us whether the Lord discusses their claims to have done these works does not in any way show that they did them. Of course, we do know from Rev 20:12-14 that the Lord indeed will evaluate every claim made. He will look at every single work done by every unbeliever.

But even if they actually did these things, these are not things which unbelievers are incapable of doing. In Matt 7:15-20 the Lord spoke of false prophets. Clearly the Lord Himself said that unbelievers can prophesy in His name.

Luke tells us in Acts of “seven sons of Sceva, a Jewish chief priest,” who cast out demons (Acts 19:14). Luke calls them “itinerant Jewish exorcists” (Acts 19:13). If these men had been Christians, Luke surely would not have called them “itinerant *Jewish* exorcists.”

The fact that Matthew does not tell us whether or not the Lord questions their claims is irrelevant. The claim that unbelievers could not do such works is not true.

Fourth, Dillow argues that doing the will of the Father “is the opposite of ‘those who practice lawlessness’ (7:23); it is about obedience, not initial faith for salvation” (p. 306).

This is not the point. The verse is not set up as antithetically parallel to v 21. Here is an example of antithetical parallelism: “The young lions lack and suffer hunger; but those who seek the Lord shall not lack any good thing” (Ps 34:10). What is compared is lacking versus not lacking.

“I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness” is clearly *related to* v 21. The reason they are departing from Jesus and being sent to the lake of fire (Rev 20:15) is because they did not do the will of the Father by believing in the Son and hence they were not found in the book of life.

The words, “you who practice lawlessness [lit. you who work lawlessness]” are not the opposite of the will of the Father as Dillow suggests. *All people* work lawlessness according to Rom 3:23; Gal 3:10; and Jas 2:10—even those who do the will of the Father. We know at the Great White Throne Judgment that books of deeds will be opened and everyone present (unbelievers) will be judged according to their works: “And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books” (Rev 20:12). Their works will show that they have no valid claim to enter the kingdom on the basis of works. By pointing out that they are sinners the Lord is making this point. Of course, the ultimate reason why they will be sent to the lake of fire is because they did not believe in Christ, that is, they did not do the will of the Father (Matt 7:21-23; Rev 20:15).

If these people had been believers who had been unfaithful in their service, then they would *not* hear the words of v 23 (“I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!”), but instead words like, “Out of your own mouth I will judge you, you wicked *servant*” (Luke 19:22, emphasis added) or “You wicked and lazy *servant*...” (Matt 25:26, emphasis added).

Dillow's fourth argument is not a compelling one.

WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE?

You may think it doesn't really matter which view is correct since both Dillow and I affirm the freeness of everlasting life conditioned solely upon believing in Jesus. And we both affirm the doctrine of eternal rewards for work done. So why even discuss this?

Clearly Dillow sees this as important. He devoted years writing *Final Destiny*, a book of over 1,000 pages. A major element in the book is this idea that kingdom entrance refers to abundance of life in the kingdom and that it is conditioned on surpassing personal righteousness. He devotes seven chapters (Chapters 18-24) or 122 pages (pp. 228-349) to this issue of entering the kingdom by doing the will of the Father.

I agree that this issue is important, though I take the opposite view that Dillow does on what entering the kingdom means and on what the will of the Father is in Matt 7:21.

Practically speaking, what difference does it make which way we understand Matt 7:21-23 and the concepts of doing the will of the Father and of entering the kingdom?

All Scripture is inspired and profitable (2 Tim 3:16-17). But—and here's the catch—God's Word is only profitable for the hearer if we use it as it was intended (Isa 55:11).

Only if we properly understand passages can we properly apply them.

First, if Dillow's interpretation of Matt 7:15-23 is right, then the correct application is to work hard to fulfill all of God's commands so that we might rule with Christ. But is that completely accurate? Is that what the rest of the NT teaches? Is not the essential condition of ruling with Christ persevering *in our confession of Him* (Matt 10:32-33; 2 Tim 2:12)?¹ While confessing Christ is a work, that is not the same as obeying *all* of God's commands.

Second, pressed to its logical conclusion, if doing the will of the Father is obeying all of God's commands, then no one (other than the Lord Jesus) will do the will of the Father and no one will rule with Christ. Dillow is forced to conclude that the issue here is a sort of *partial* doing of the will of the Father.

Third, if Matt 7:21-23 concerns unbelievers at the Great White Throne Judgment, then the correct application for believers is for us to warn unbelievers that their works cannot get them into the kingdom. If they wish to spend eternity with the Lord and with His people, then they need to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. We could tell them about the Great White Throne Judgment. We might well walk them through Rev 20:11-15 and the books (of works) and the book (of life). We would certainly tell them that the moment one believes in Jesus for everlasting life then he has once and for all done the will of the Father and thus he will never come into judgment concerning his eternal destiny (John 5:24). Of course, in order to explain the will of the Father, I would take a person to John 3:16; 5:24; and 6:39-40.

Fourth, if the narrow way that few find in Matt 7:13-14 is the way to spending eternity with the Lord in His kingdom, then this means the majority of people will miss the kingdom. That certainly gives us a sense of urgency in evangelism.

Fifth, if the issue in Matt 7:13-14 is greatness in the kingdom as Dillow argues (see pp. 227, 242, 256, 258, 267, 279-98), then hypothetically, the majority of people could end up entering the kingdom. While that is not Dillow's position, his understanding of Matt 7:13-14 opens the way for others to conclude that.

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¹ Of course, all words will be evaluated at the Bema (2 Cor 5:10). What we sow we will reap (Gal 6:7-9). The wholehearted servant has more good works and will have more cities to rule over (Luke 19:17, 19). But the minimum requirement to rule at all is enduring in our confession of Christ (2 Tim 2:12).