

Willfulness

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In my book, *Four in the Garden*, I avoided the use of the word "sin" because it's such a religiously-loaded and off-putting word. It conjures feelings of shame, guilt, and condemnation. Rather than driving us to God, it generally has the opposite effect. Sin is often used to describe "bad" behavior or to describe the lifestyle of "bad" people. The traditional view of sin is that it makes us the object of God's anger and subject to His judgment. In some unenlightened circles, we're told that sin is sin because it's "wrong." Or sin is wrong because it's sin. This shame-inducing mentality doesn't lead us to experience the abundant life that Jesus talks about: "I have come that they may have life and have it to the full." - John 10:10.

So I chose the word "willfulness" in place of sin. I think the word willfulness more aptly describes the true nature of sin. When we are willful, we insist on our own way, we resist authority, and we are unyielding. From a relational perspective, willfulness pushes others away and doesn't take into account their thoughts or feelings. When we are willful, we push God away, we reject His participation in our lives, and we refuse to listen to Him.

A Meaty Example

Let's suppose I'm on a road trip with friends and we stop for dinner. I suggest we stop at In-N-Out because I'm in the mood for one of their hamburgers. Others weigh in with their suggestions, but I insist on In-N-Out. A friend says, "You had a hamburger for lunch. Don't you want something different for dinner?" I say, "It wasn't an In-N-Out burger. It's not the same. It's In-N-Out or nothing." Another friend says, "Eating hamburgers isn't healthy. Shouldn't you have a salad instead?" I say, "I don't want a salad. I want an In-N-Out burger. I won't change my mind."

The above example illustrates how willfulness behaves. Willfulness is usually expressed as "my way or no way." It's stubborn, doesn't listen to reason, doesn't consider consequences, and doesn't make room for the will of others. It's an energy that asserts its will and resists or discounts any opposing forces. We use it to justify our unhealthy or addictive behaviors. Can you think

of situations where you were willful? In what ways have you been willful toward God?

It's About Relationship

We need to discuss the effects of willfulness in light of our relationship with God. Jesus died to make relationship with God possible, so sin (willfulness) is defined in terms its damaging effects on relationship. The wrongness of willfulness is due to the relational harm it causes. When we are full of our own will, we disregard others and disregard the interdependence we have with others. From the beginning, God wanted relationship with us. When willfulness enters, we set ourselves as independent of God, severing our relationship with Him. That's why God abhors willfulness. God hates anything that damages our relationship with Him. His primary concern is our relationship with Him and how our behaviors affect that relationship. Some people think His main concern is whether we are "sinning" or not.

God can't work with willfulness because it's oppositional. Willfulness resists God. And God resists willfulness. Willfulness can be subtle. It manifests when we rationalize our behavior, when we make excuses for our faults, whenever we shove God aside or ignore Him.

Laying It Down

When we recognize willfulness in our lives, we have a choice between holding on to it or to holding on to God. We can't do both. True spirituality is to lay down our willfulness and submit to God's will instead. It's a choice between our will and God's will. The humility God seeks of us is to lay down our will and to choose to trust Him, believing that His will for us is good. The hard part is doing this on a regular basis. It's a daily practice to recognize willfulness within our hearts and to intentionally lay it down every time. In doing so, we make ourselves open to relationship with God. Instead of resisting Him, our humility invites Him to take residence in our hearts so He can engage us daily in ever-growing relationship with Him.

In my book, *Four in the Garden*, the protagonist, Cherished, chooses forbidden knowledge. This act of willfulness is seen as a declaration of independence from Creator. In effect, Cherished chooses knowledge over having to depend on Creator for guidance. His willfulness has shoved Creator aside, thus destroying his relationship with Creator. Self-rule becomes the norm for Cherished, but he learns that being master of his own life isn't that great.

Like Cherished, we struggle with the tension between depending on ourselves and depending on God. Depending on God seems fraught with uncertainty. Depending on ourselves feels like the more reliable option, but it fails us when life gets difficult. In my experience, depending on God is the better option because God has shown Himself faithful to those who trust Him.

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Rick Hocker

Author of *Four in the Garden*

An Allegory about One's Relationship with God

Readers' Favorite International Book Award Winner

Available in print and e-book at all online stores

Email: rick@rickhocker.com

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