

The Sin of Self-Will

A Sermon by Richard Baxter

Every wicked man is a self-willed man, against God, and all that speak for God. And till self be mortified in the will, there is no saving grace in that will.

Quest. But what will is it that is to be called a self-will?

Answ. Not that which is from God and for God; but all the rest. 1. That will that is not fetched from

God, and moved by his will, as the lesser wheels in a clock are moved by the first wheel and by the power, is no better than self-will. A will that is not dependent on Gods will, is an Idol, usurping the prerogative of God; for it is proper to him to be dependent upon none, and to have a will that is not ruled by a Superior will. Little do the most know how great a sin this is, to be self-willed. You have a will to something or other continually; and it is your will that ruleth the rest of your faculties and actions: but what is it that ruleth your will? whence do you fetch the rise and reason of your desires? Is it from Gods will, or is it not? You pray to God [Thy will be done] and do your own wills answer these prayers? or are they hypocritical dissembling words? If indeed it be Gods will that you would have fulfilled, then will the knowledge of that will of God determine your own wills. As a servant dependeth on his Masters will, for all the work that he is to do, and doth not what he will himself, but what his Master will have him do; and as a Scholar dependeth on his Masters will, and learneth only such books and lessons as he sets him; so must we depend on the will of God; and know what is his will, before we give way to any will of our own. The reason why you choose any trade or calling or course of life, should be the will of God. If you are in Poverty, and desire to be richer, and that to please your own wills, and not that you think that it would be any more pleasing to God, this is self-willedness. If you desire any change in your condition, if you undertake any thing in the world, know why you do this: whether it be principally because you think it is the will of God, or because it is your own will; I tell you again, you should not have one wish or desire in your souls, till you can prove or find that God would

have it so: and if your own wills be made the absolute rulers of your ways, you make Gods of your selves, and God will deal with you accordingly.

2. Yea if you do think the will of God is according to your will, and you are moved the more to it on that account, yet if your own wills do lead and make the first choice, and Gods will be brought in but to follow and encourage yours, this is still Self-willedness and Self-idolizing. This is the common trick of the ungodly. They first give way to their own self-will, and then they will go to Scripture for somewhat to bear them out; and will needs believe that God's is agreeable to theirs, that so they may go on with peace of Conscience. They go for counsel to God as Balaam did, not sincerely to know the will of God with a resolution to obey it, but with a desire that God would conform his will to theirs. I tell you if the matter be never so much commanded in the Scriptures, and never so agreeable to the will of God, yet if you desire and do it from your selves, and not for this reason, because it is the will of God, and do not let Gods will lead your own, but let your own will lead, and Gods will follow, this is no better than self-willedness, were the matter never so good in itself.

3. If the end that moveth your will, be not the service and glory of God, but only your own Interest, this is but self-will. God giveth you leave to look to your selves as his servants in a due subservience to him: But if you will principally look at your own interest, and make light of Gods, and fetch the reason of your will and desires from your own ends and commodity, rather than his Glory, this is an ungodly selfish-will. And yet alas, how many are there that know not any better frame of will than this? If they were truly to give an account of the principal reason and motive of every desire of their hearts, why they would have this, or why they would do that, must they not confess it is for themselves, because it serveth their own ends or interests, and because it pleaseth their own wills, and not because it furnisheth them better to serve and please the will of God. If you ask men in their buying, and selling, and marrying, and trading, and dealing with men, why it is that they do this or that; can they truly say, I do it because I think in this way I can do God the best service, and the Church or Commonwealth most good; and this is my chief reason? Alas, I fear they are too few that have any higher principal end and motive than self. Self-will is the spring of their whole Conversations, that sets them upon all they do. Nay doubtless, in the very duties of Religion, in praying, hearing, reading and the like, they are but serving self, while they take on them

to serve God; and their holiest devotions is but such a serving of God, as flatterers will serve their Prince or Landlord, merely that he may do them a good turn, and may serve their Ends, and be serviceable to them; or else as some Indians serve the Devil, for fear of him lest he should do them a mischief. The will that is moved chiefly by self-interest, is a self-will.

4. And much more is it self-willedness, when men contradict the Will of God: when Scripture saith One thing, and they another: when they disrelish Gods Laws, and dislike the work that he sets them on; when they have a Will to that which God forbids, and would fain be doing with unlawful things; yea and it doth not satisfy their corrupt desires to see that the express will of God is against them; this is self-will in a high degree.

5. So also when men's wills are to that which is against the honour and interest of God; which would hinder this Gospel, and the saving men's souls, and is displeasing to him, this is self-willedness in a high degree.

And thus you see what it is to be self-willed. And now do but consider whether this part of self be commonly denied in the world. Among the millions of desires that are in men's hearts, how few of them are kindled by the commands of God, or moved by his Interest and Glory? How commonly are the word and ways of God distasteful to the world? How ill do men like the disposals of his providence? And what a striving is there in their wills against him? And were it not that God is above them and unconquerable, and they know that striving will not help them, you should have most of the world in open war against the God of Heaven: I speak no more than I am able to prove. The Dominion of self is so great in the wills of all that are unsanctified, that their wills are utterly against the Will of God; and it's merely, because there's no remedy, that they submit to him so far as they do. Those very persons that think they love and serve him as well as the precise, would be in arms against him before tomorrow, and pull God out of Heaven if it were in their power: Or if they had but as much hope to prevail against God, as they have against his servants, what work would be in the world? I know these men will not believe this by themselves: No, self is too strong in them to let them so far know themselves; But the Case is plain. For as God himself tell us, that ever since the fall an Enmity is put between Christ and this serpentine seed; so we see it manifested by daily sad experience. How generally is the Will of God disliked by

the world? What hath God spoke against in his Word but sin? and what else hath he commanded his Messengers to Cry out against? And yet what is there that more pleaseth the minds of the most? And how stubbornly do they resist not only God, but Magistrates and Ministers that would draw them from it? what is it that God commendeth to the world so much as an Holy and Heavenly life? And what is the Heart of most men more against? and how much do they strive against all our persuasions that would bring them to it? and how obstinately do they resist us, if not deride and scorn that Holiness which the will of God hath so abundantly commended to them? His whole Word speaks for it: his Prophets, Apostles, and all his servants are examples of it; his Son Jesus Christ in his sacred person, and office, and holy life, hath yet more notably commended it to the world; and it was a principal part of his business in the flesh, to set men a pattern of Holiness and Self-denial: And yet many scorn it, & hate it, and most dislike it, and even fight against this holy Will of God, that is, against God himself, as if they had but any hope to get the better. There is no doubt of it, though they will not know so much by themselves. Do you think it is for nothing that God calleth them his enemies, and resolveth them the reward of enemies, even because they would not have Christ to rule over them? Luke 19. 27. Doubtless God sentenceth no man unjustly: If he say they are such, and condemn them as such it's certain that they are such. O but the infinite dreadful God is out of their reach; but they be not out of his reach. Their malice cannot hurt him any more than it can stop the course of the Sun; but his displeasure will quickly bring them down. In the meantime, these wretches should consider what a God they have had to do with, that beareth with their malignity. The Sun or Moon forbears not to shine even on the dogs that bark at them. Thy rebellious self hath hitherto been maintained by the mercy of that Will of God which thou hast resisted. But this patience will not always last: Take therefore this necessary advice in time. Down with thine own Idolatrous self-will; know not a will or desire in thy self, that's not moved by the will of God, even by his word as thy ground, and his pleasure and honour as thy chiefest end. Destroy that will that springs but from self, and is moved but by the Interest of self. Slay it before the Lord as his enemy as Samuel did Agag. Though a hypocritical Saul will spare this King of rebellion, designed to destruction, yet so will not an obedient servant of God. I will not bid thee offer it in sacrifice to Gods Will: for it is too vile to be an acceptable sacrifice: But utterly destroy it as the accursed thing. Know not hereafter such a thing within thee as a will that is Originally or finally thine Own. If the Word and the Glory of God be the movers of

it, thou mayest call that Gods Will, as well as thine own. It is thine subjectively, but it is Gods as the principal Efficient and End. O that you did but know what your own wills are, and what they have done against you, and what they may yet do, if they be not mortified! You would not then be so indulgent to them, and pamper and please them, and be so desirous to have your own wills as you have been. To this end I pray you consider but of these particulars following.

1. The will of man is the terrestrial Throne of God. It is there that he must reign. The will is to Rule all the inferior faculties; and God is to rule the will. And shall self-presume to dethrone the Lord, and sit down in his place? He that rules the will rules the man. And shall self be thy Ruler? And will God put up all this?

2. It is God only that hath the Sovereign authority, and self hath none but under him. We are not our own; and therefore have nothing to do with our selves but at the Will of God that is our Owner. Take heed therefore of this Usurpation.

3. Thy own will is a corrupt and sinful will, and therefore unfit to be thy governor: what wilt thou choose an unjust, a wicked and unmerciful governor, that is inclined to do evil? Why such is thine own Will; But the Will of God is perfectly good, that hath not the least inclination to evil, nor possibility of such a thing. Be ruled by it, and you are most certain to have the most just, and holy, and faithful, and merciful ruler in the world. To prefer self-will before the Will of God, is as the Jews, to prefer a murderer Barabbas, before the Lord of life.

4. Moreover, Our own wills are guided by a dark understanding: and therefore ready on every occasion to turn aside. Though the will commandeth, yet the understanding guideth it: And therefore as the dark understanding is commonly at a loss, or quite mistaken judging evil to be good, and good to be evil: so the will must be an unhappy governor, that followeth the direction of so ignorant a Counsellor: But if you will deny your Own wills, and be ruled by the Will of God, you need not fear misleading, seeing his wisdom is infallible and infinite. Choose not a blind guide then, when you may have the conduct of wisdom itself; when God is content to be your Governor, prefer not such foolish sinners as your selves before him.

5. Moreover, Your self-will hath almost undone you already: It hath been the cause of all your sin and misery: Never any hurt befell you, or any man on Earth, but from self-will. And yet will you follow it still, and take no warning, as if it had not done enough against you? But on the contrary, you were never hurt in all your lives by following the Will of God: unless it be such a hurt as the searching or cleansing of a sore, without which it cannot be healed; or such a hurt as the taking of Physic, without which you can have no cure. Tell me if you can, whenever the Will of God did wrong you? when did you speed the worse for the following of his counsel? Look back upon your lives, and tell me whether all your smart and loss have come from your following God's Will, or your own; and which you think you have more cause to repent of.

6. There is none followeth self-will to the end, but is everlastingly undone by it: It leadeth directly to the displeasing of Gods Will, and so to Hell: But on the contrary, there is none that sincerely and finally follow the Will of God, that ever do miscarry: He is the safest Conductor: He never led a soul to hell. All that follow him, live with him: For whither should he lead them but to himself? And where God is, there is life and glory. To obey his Will, is to please his Will: And to please him, is our very end. It cannot go ill with them that please the Lord and Judge of all the word, the dispenser of all Rewards and Punishments.

7. Your own wills are so mutable as well as misguided, that they will bewilder you and toss you up and down in perpetual disquietness; though I know you think that is the only way to your content, and nothing will content you unless you have your will. But you are lamentably deluded; your wills are like the will of a man in a fever, that would fain have cold water, which pleaseth him in the drinking, but afterwards may be his death. You love that which hurteth you; yea that which is no better than poison to your Souls. You would soon undo your selves, if you had your own wills. It is none of the least of Gods mercies to you to cross your wills and to deny you that which you have a mind to. You will not let your Children eat or drink what they will, but what you will, that know better what's good for them. A patient can deny his own will for his health, and submit himself to the will of his Physician. And should not you much more submit to God? yea you should desire him to deny your own wills, whenever he seeth them contrary to his Will, and to your own good:

Had you but the skill of judging aright of Gods dealings, I am persuaded that upon the review of your lives, you would find, that God hath shewed you more mercy in the crossing of your wills, then in accomplishing them. Be not therefore too eager for the time to come, to have what you Love, till you are surer that you Love nothing but that which is good for you, and which you should love. The present contenting of diseased self-will, is but the breeding after-disquietness, But in the Will of God you may have sure and durable content. For his Will is always for good, and therefore hath nothing that should cause your discontent. His will is still the same & unchangeable; and therefore will not disquiet you by mutations. He knows the end at the beginning, and sets you upon nothing but what he is sure will comfort you at the last. It belongeth to his will and not to yours to dispose of you and all your affairs. And therefore there is all the reason in the world, that Gods Will should be set up, and in it you should rest yourselves content, and that self-will should be denied as the disturber of your quietness.

8. Moreover, Self-will is Satan's will, & stirred up by him against the Lord. How else do you think the Devil rules the children of disobedience, but by self-conceit and self-will? If therefore you would deny the Devil, deny self-will; for in being ruled by it, you are ruled by him; and in pleasing it, you please him. God himself tells you this in plain expressions, Eph. 2. 1, 2, 3. They that walk in trespasses and sins, and so are dead in them, according to the course of this world, and in the lusts of the flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, these the Holy Ghost there tells you, do walk according to the Prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience.

9. It is the very perfection and felicity of man, to be conformed to the Will of God, and to rest with full content therein; and it is the corruption and misery of man, to have a selfish misguided Will of his own, and strive against his Makers Will. And so far as you stick in your own wills, and are set upon them, and must have them fulfilled, and cannot rest in the Will of God, so far are you still unsanctified, and unsaved, and in the power of your great disease. And so far as you are dead to self-will, and look up to the Will of God both for direction and content, and will that which he willeth, even because he willeth it, and would have you will it, and can rest your souls in this as full satisfaction [It is my Fathers Will, and therefore best.] So far are you sanctified and restored to God.

10. Lastly, let me tell you, that it's best for you to deny self-will in time, and give your wills to the Will of God. For when you have done all that you can, God will have his Will, and you shall not have your own will long. You may strive against the Will of God, but you shall not frustrate it. You may break his Laws, but shall not scape his judgments. You may rebel against his commanding will, but you cannot resist his punishing will. When you have done your worst, it's Gods will that must stand; and such a will as is little to the pleasure of your wills. But Self-will is never of long continuance: its content is short. Now you will have your will, let God say what he will to you: you Love to please your appetite in meats and drinks; you love to be carnally merry, and spend your time in vain sports and pleasure; you love to be respected and humoured by all, and to be honoured and counted some body in the world; you love to be provided for, for the time to come, & to be wealthy that you may take out of a full heap; or at least not want for the contentment of your flesh: and therefore you must have your wills, & have that you love, if you can tell how to get it: But how long will you have your wills? How long will you have that you love, though God forbid it? When death comes, will you have it then? when you lie in pain expecting every hour to appear in another world, will you then have your wills? when you are in Hell, will you then have your wills, or that you love? O Sirs, Self-will is short-lived, as to its delights and pleasure: But the Will of God is everlasting. And therefore if you take up with your own wills, how short will be your content! but if you look for content in the Will of God, you will have everlasting content. Your own wills may be crossed by every trifle; any man that is greater than you can cross them: yea those that are under you can cross them. The poorest beggar can rob you, or scorn you, or raise a slander of you, or twenty ways can cross your self-wills; A hundred accidents may cross them. Your very Beast can cross you; and almost anything in the world can cross you; much more can God at any time cross you; and cross you certainly he will: so that in your own wills there is no rest nor happiness. But if you could bring your wills to Gods, and take up your full content in this [It is the Will of God,] then what a constant, invincible content might you have! Then all the world could not disturb you and rob you of your content, because they cannot conquer the Will of God: His will shall be done; and so you should always have content.