

3

CHAPTER

THE GOD OF 100 PERCENT

Now, I've gotta tell you that lying behind every myth concerning God's will is a myth about God. That's why these next few pages could be the most important of this book. Today, scores and scores of people can't possibly find it within themselves to navigate life with God, and it's not because every last one of them wake up every morning and intentionally choose to ride with the devil. Most of them do not set out with the intention of seeing how many lives they can destroy. In truth, the reason many people can't imagine life with God is because they've not heard about, experienced, or seen remnants of a God deserving their allegiance. To be precise, they disassociate themselves with God, and it's not because of who He is, but *who they see Him to be*.

Now, I'm not stupid enough to think that I hold the monopoly on God's true identity ... that I, and I alone, understand God completely, as He truly is, without the slightest hint of falsehood. I may be a little slow, but I'm not that slow. In fact, couldn't we all agree that at this very moment, some miscon-

ceptions and lack of clarity about who He is are lying within the recesses of our minds? And that those very misconceptions create dysfunction in our relationship with Him?

In his book, *Your God Is Too Small* (my apologies, but this title seemed rather offensive until I read further and realized his title was actually quite fitting), author J.B. Phillips explores several of the more destructive images of God, one of which he calls “the god of absolute perfection,” or “the god of 100 percent.” Phillips exploits this mythical god in saying that “since God is perfection, and since He asks the complete loyalty of His creatures, then the best way of serving, pleasing, and worshiping Him is to set up absolute, 100 percent standards and see to it that we obey them. After all, did Christ not say, ‘Be ye perfect’?”¹

Now, imagine a pastor like me reading this passage of Scripture and encouraging congregants with these words, “If we are to follow God, we must give Him whole-hearted devotion, 100 percent of our loyalty and lifestyle!” Some sitting in their seats may hear these words and genuinely be spurred on to live in a manner more pleasing to God than they are currently living. However, there are others sitting in their seats who have personalities marked by introspection and reflection. These individuals hear these words and minutes later leave the sermon more disillusioned than they came. In fact, it’s words like these that perhaps fuel their guilt when trying to lead the Christian life. In Phillips’s words, it “has led quite a number of sensitive conscientious people to what is popularly called a ‘nervous breakdown.’” Why? Because the more sensitive, conscientious people *know* the messed-up motives that inhabit many of their behaviors. They understand full-well that a lifestyle of 100 percent is not and never will be possible ... 100 percent truthful, 100 percent forgiving, 100 percent honest, 100 percent selfless, 100 percent faithful ...

Now, imagine the god of 100 percent sitting in the heavens awaiting our next decision. Many of us will be immobilized from ever stepping out and making a decision in the first place! We will be incapacitated with the fear that once we finally make a decision regarding a job, finances, a college major, or a living situation, God will be sitting high in the sky angrily saying, “WRONG, YOU LOSE!” And at that point, all we’ll be left with is a second-rate life because we just took one wrong turn. And after our next faulty decision, we’ll be onto plan C ... then plan D ... then plan E ... and so on.

Clearly, the god of 100 percent is interested in one thing: performance. And as long as we observe the will of God through the lens of treasure maps, formulas, equations, and blueprints, we will too. The focus of our attention will forever be set on execution, performance, and the final product or destination.

Recently I was on vacation traveling on a five-lane highway that cut through a growing suburb. As my car pulled up to a red light, I could see a giant billboard less than fifty yards away positioned before the entrance to a church. The billboard featured three men wearing hard hats, examining and discussing the contents of a large blueprint rolled out on an architect’s desk. As I got closer, I read its big, block-lettered caption, “Discover God’s Plan for Your Life!”—with the church’s name and gathering times.

Now, let’s consider this metaphor for a second. If the wind knocks down a wall of a new building, the builder simply puts up another wall, and the occupants never know or feel the difference. If the blueprint that’s been drawn for your life includes marrying your high school sweetheart who dies in an auto accident two weeks before the wedding, you may find a new spouse eventually, but your life will NEVER be the same. You will be forever changed. And in that moment, the fiancée who’s

been hiding blueprints in the recesses of his/her mind will find him/herself at an incredible crossroads. With the old lenses (formulas, treasure maps, blueprints, recipes), more often than not, he/she will be left with, “I screwed up and God is angry with me,” or, “God screwed up and I hate Him.” This is where leaders in the Church must take every precaution to understand the full implications of the analogies we use.

Those of us who are leaders in the Church are frequently searching for contemporary metaphors to describe the intangible things of God. But I’ve learned by experience—and, oh, how I’ve learned by experience!—that metaphors are always risky. With a single metaphor, a pastor can communicate two messages that he/she *intended* to communicate but six messages that he/she did not. We might intentionally want to communicate that God is truly concerned with our lives and has good desires for each of us. But we might unintentionally communicate that God truly holds a detailed map of our lives that’s broken down into years, months, days, hours, and minutes. As you may have heard, this map is called “His perfect will.” And certainly, God wants and expects us to execute all of our decisions based on this map. It is, after all, His *perfect will*—a will designed by the god of absolute perfection.

The God of the Scriptures, though, seems more interested in relationship than performance. Luke recounts an interesting interaction between Jesus and two of His good friends in chapter 10, verses 38–42:

As they continued their travel, Jesus entered a village. A woman by the name of Martha welcomed him and made him feel quite at home. She had a sister, Mary, who sat before the Master, hanging on every word he said. But Martha was pulled away by all she had to do in the kitchen. Later, she stepped in, interrupting them.

“Master, don’t you care that my sister has abandoned the kitchen to me? Tell her to lend me a hand.”

The Master said, “Martha, dear Martha, you’re fussing far too much and getting yourself worked up over nothing. One thing only is essential, and Mary has chosen it—it’s the main course, and won’t be taken from her.” (Luke 10:38–42 The Message)

Thomas Cahill insightfully wrote in *Desire of the Everlasting Hills*, “This encounter might seem intolerable if it concerned anyone other than Jesus. If we imagine Mary as the household member who after dinner is far too absorbed in her guests’ fascinating conversation to bother about clearing the table but leaves all that sort of thing to her drudge of a sister, we may find ourselves solidly on Martha’s side of the argument.” But we’re not talking about an average day in the life of Mary and Martha, are we? We’re talking about a small measure of time in which Jesus—one who seemed to rarely be without a crowd—has His undivided attention set on two good friends. “Whatever Martha is huffing and puffing about can be put off till Jesus moves on,” adds Cahill.²

Jesus isn’t staying for two weeks. It’s a rare moment without crowds or interrogations, and Martha is knee-deep in duties that are expected of her as a woman in a patriarchal society (In *Jesus and the Victory of God*, N.T. Wright comments that Mary’s behavior is subversive on *another* level as well³). For Martha, her reality is her work. She can’t see beyond the execution of her duties, and in a first century patriarchal Palestinian village as this, we can’t really blame her. But the message Jesus has embodied is difficult to miss, and because it’s so simply profound, it’s also difficult to absorb:

Jesus is deeply concerned with us.

Jesus is concerned with us and our well-being.

Could God actually be one whose primary concern is getting His little pawn pieces from point A to point B to point C to point D? Sure, He *could*. But it's my belief that that is not who He is.

When describing the intangible things of God, pastors like me will often use metaphors in hopes of putting feet to what is being explained. But as a general rule of thumb, cold hard analogies that convey following God in mechanistic terms often come up lame because they can't communicate the heart of God. They do a fantastic job of relating machinery, house construction, and algorithms, but they're not even in the same ballpark when it comes to describing the complexities of a heart-mind-soul-spirit human person who's trying to navigate life and faith.

An alternative is long overdue, an alternative that always places relationship with God at the center of all of our realities. We need an alternative that never elevates God's will above God. And we need an alternative that leaves us feeling as though we've returned to the heart of scripture and historical Christianity, not an alternative that leaves us guessing whether the Scriptures would echo the same.

1. J.B. Phillips, *Your God Is Too Small* (Touchstone Books, New York, NY: 1997) p. 30.
2. Thomas Cahill, *Desire of the Everlasting Hills* (Anchor Books, New York, NY: 1999) p. 185.
3. N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Fortress Press, Minneapolis, MN: 1996) p. 52.