

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Scripture Memory		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	67		Gary L.W. Johnson
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KNOWING GOD'S WILL (Part V)

The Reformers spoke of the *clarity of Scripture* (*perspicuitas scripturae* – perspicuity refers to clarity of thought. This is called one of the traditional attributes of Scripture). By this the Reformers meant that the essential content of the Bible is clear enough to be understood easily. Biblical Christianity, therefore, is not an esoteric religion. The Bible is not a book that requires some sort of mystic insight or special intellectual powers or pneumatic gift in order to understand its basic message. “The Bible,” writes R. C. Sproul, “speaks of God in meaningful patterns of speech. Some of those patterns may be more difficult than others, but they are not meant to be nonsense statements that only a guru can fathom.” There are, however, *two* senses in which the word *understand* can be used in reference to the Scriptures: (1) We can *know* something of the meaning of the texts of Scripture without (2) having an understanding of the message.¹ Note the words of John Owen: “There is an especial work of the Spirit of God on the minds of men, communicating spiritual wisdom, light, and understanding unto them, necessary unto their discerning and apprehending aright the mind of God in His word, and the understanding of the mysteries of heavenly truth contained therein. And I shall add hereunto, that among all the false and foolish imaginations that ever the Christian religion was attacked or disturbed withal, there never was any, there is none more pernicious than this, that the mysteries of the gospel are so exposed unto the common reason and understanding of men as that they may know them and comprehend them in a *useful manner*, and *according to their duty*, without the effectual aid and assistance of the Spirit of God.”² The Psalmist in 119:34 prays for this assistance in order to understand. Why did he want understanding? In order that he might know and do the will of God. How often the question is asked, “How can I know the will of God for my life?” This was the Psalmist’s concern. “The only fear of his heart,” remarks G. Campbell Morgan, “is that he may not understand the revelation. This fear drives him to prayer that he may understand.”³

- I. **WHAT IS MEANT BY “UNDERSTANDING?”** The Hebrew word *hebhin* (in the hiphil stem) means “to give understanding, to cause to understand, to teach.” The word, common in Psalm 119, is found in verses 34, 73, 125, 130, 144, 169. The word stresses the ability to understand. It is the power of judgment and perceptive insight and is demonstrated in the use of knowledge.⁴ “This *understanding*,” writes Bridges, “differs from mere intellectual discernment or speculative knowledge. It is the spring of spiritual activity in our walk with God (See Col. 1:9, 10); so that our obedience is not outward and reluctant, but filial delight and wholeness of heart: we desire not only to *keep the law of God to the end*, but every day *to the end* – *with our whole heart*.”⁵

- A. **The Nature of Understanding.** “The understanding,” writes Spurgeon, “is the pilot and guide of the whole man; that faculty which sits at the stern of the soul: but as the most expert guide may mistake in the dark, so may the understanding, when it wants the light of knowledge. *Without knowledge the mind cannot be good* (Proverbs 19:2); nor the life good; nor the external condition safe (Ephesians 4:18). *My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge* (Hosea 4:6).”⁶

B. ***The Need for Understanding.*** The desire of the Psalmist is not merely abstract and theoretical. It is a kind of understanding that relates to the work and will of the living God. This understanding corresponds to Paul's statement in 2 Timothy 3:16. It is a matter of receiving that *teaching* and also the *reproof* and *correction* that leads to *training in righteousness*. It means knowing as in God's presence (*Coram Deo*) what God's truth requires of us in our daily lives. Apart from this *all* of our activities and efforts are futile. We also need to carefully pay attention to such texts like Hebrews 5:11-14 and 1 Corinthians 3:1-2. It could be that the reason we lack understanding stems from a lack of appetite. The Evangelical church today (including groups that specifically call themselves "Charismatics") is full of spiritual infants (who are tossed to and from by every wind of doctrine – Ephesians 4:14) who not only cannot digest the meat of the Word, but have no desire for the milk of the Word either! Erroll Hulse, a former Pentecostal minister who came to embrace the Reformed faith, says the greatest need in the church today centers around the ministry of the Word. "Exposition, counsel, advice and exhortation from the Word are to this end, that faith may be nurtured, strengthened, built up and made victorious. Experience is vital and important. We neglect it at our peril, but it comes after faith. If experience usurps the central place which we give the Word of God, then experience will become a substitute for study and preaching. That is exactly what we are seeing with some ministers. They have succumbed to the miserable deception that experience will do the work. Sensations will draw the people, and charismatic excitement will keep them happy. We hear complaints from believers that they are no longer fed with expository preaching. Gone is the labour, care and discipline essential for the feeding of the flock. Gone is a comprehensive command of the grand doctrines of the Bible which engender the obedience of faith and build up strong, resilient, mature Christians. Instead of a hearty meal for hungry souls, we have popcorn and fizzy drinks, peanuts and marshmallows, coloured balloons, vain repetitions, and a general overall emphasis on entertainment."⁷

II. ***THE CHANGE FROM LYING TO TRUTH*** (Eph. 4:25-30)

- A. ***The negative*** – "put off (cf. v. 22) the lie."
- B. ***The positive*** – "speak (present imperative) truth."
- C. ***The motive*** – "for we are all members of one body." The theological truth of the church, the Body of Christ, Paul viewed as the motive for practical honesty in the Christian life.

III. ***THE CHANGE FROM SINFUL ANGER*** (vv. 26, 27)

- A. ***The positive*** – "Be angry" (permissive imperative). It is not a sin to be angry as such, but . . .
- B. ***The negative*** – "do not sin" (present imperative). "Do not let the sun go down on your anger" – when anger is cherished and harbored, then it is sin. The word for anger in this last clause is *parorgismōi*, refers to an angry mood or disposition. A violent irritation is meant, expressed by either hiding one's self from others or by flaming looks, harmful words, inconsiderate actions.
- C. ***The warning*** – "do not give (present imperative) the devil a place." The expression refers to giving the *diabolōi*, lit. slanderer, room or a sphere of operation in unbridled anger of all the sinful actions mentioned in this section, Paul pinpoints the "tongue" as the thing most susceptible to Satanic influence, comp. with James 3:1-9.

IV. **THE CHANGE IN ACQUISITION** (v. 28)

- A. **The negative** – “do not steal.” (present imperative).
- B. **The positive** – “labor in his work.” The word for “labor” is *kopiatō*, present imperative, lit. to grow weary, to labor with effort.
- C. **The motive** – “in order that (*hina* purpose clause) he may have opportunity to share.” The “Christian work ethic” is not simply one of building our own nest egg, but is to extend to the needs of the Body of Christ.

V. **THE CHANGE IN SPEECH** (vv. 29-30)

- A. **The negative** – “no foul speaking” (present imperative). The word “foul” is *sapros*, corrupt, putrid, rotten, worthless, disgusting. It not only refers to filthy language but incorporates harmful and destructive, abusive speech.
- B. **The positive** – “only that which is helpful.”
- C. **The motive** – “for the up-building (edification) of others.” The lit. Greek rendering is “give grace to those who hear,” cf. Colossians 4:6.

VI. **THE CHANGE IN TEMPER** (vv. 31, 32)

- A. **The negative** – “get rid of” (*arthētō*, aorist passive imperative, to pick up and carry away, to make a clean sweep) all bitterness (*pikria*, “a figurative term denoting that fretted and irritable state of mind that keeps a man in perpetual animosity – that inclines him to harsh and uncharitable opinions of men and things – that makes him sour, crabby and repulsive in his general demeanor – that brings a scowl over his face and infuses venom into the words of his tongue”⁸). And rage (*thumos*, a temporary outburst of anger at persons or things) and anger (*orgē*, a deep flowing, settled attitude) and brawling (*kraugē*, strife, clamor, loud shouting) and slander (lit. blasphemy) and all kinds of malice (*kakiai*, bad heartedness, the root of the rest). There is a natural progress: bitterness, rage, anger, loud shouting, and slander. The first three produced the last two; all are summed up under the term “malice.”
- B. **The positive** – “you be (present imperative) tenderhearted, forgive freely (present imperative).”
- C. **The motive** – “just as (*kathōs*, in this manner or after this pattern) also God in Christ forgave you.”

VII. **THE CONTRAST: BEFORE AND AFTER** (Eph. 5:8-9). The Apostle Paul frequently uses this method in his epistles. Chapter 2 represents a good example. He never tired of pointing out the great transition from the old to the new, from death to life, from darkness to light (comp. 1 Thessalonians 5:4ff).

- A. **The Past.** You were once darkness. The verb *were* (*ēte*, imperfect, stressing continual past action) is in the emphatic position in the Greek text. Darkness refers to their once total sphere of living. Darkness controlled their behavior. All that they did was conducted in darkness. Not only *in* darkness, they *were* darkness. The word darkness, *skotos*, refers to moral and mental blackness (comp. 4:18). It is a word that is synonymous with ignorance (cf. 2 Corinthians 4:3-6).
- B. **The Present.** But now, one of Paul’s favorite phrases (cf. Romans 3:21), you are light in the Lord. **Notice:** The light did not originate in them. Believers do not possess light in themselves, it is from outside of themselves (comp. John 8:12; 1 John 3:1).
- C. **The Imperative.** Live as children of light. The word translated *live* in the NIV is *peripateite*, used in the imperative mood, lit. walk. While speaking of their

position and privilege the Apostle has called them light itself: now that he comes to speak of their conduct, he returns to this metaphor of “walking.”⁹

- D. **The Results.** For the fruit of the light consists in all goodness, righteousness and truth. Light produces certain characteristics. It will naturally do so; it need not be forced (cf. Galatians 5:22). *Goodness* -- has reference to personal character; *Righteousness* -- in relationship to our social dealings; *Truth* -- the ruling principle of all conduct, stressing obligation in all facets of life.

VIII. **THE ATTITUDE: DISCERNMENT** (vv. 10-12). As darkness parallels ignorance, so light corresponds to “understanding.” All believers, regardless of I. Q., have had “the eyes of their understanding enlightened” (1:18). They have “an anointing” from God (1 John 2:27) so as to be able to receive spiritual truth. The natural man has no such ability (1 Corinthians 2:14). This does not mean that somehow apart from our own endeavors to study the word of God (cf. 1 Timothy 4:13-16) we will grow in our understanding of spiritual truth. It will never happen.

- A. **The Expectation.** “Find out what pleases the Lord.” The word translated “find out” is *dokimazō*, to approve after examination, to arrange and execute a test, to accept and heed the results of a test, to carry out a careful examination, to discover through personal experience and effort. This involves our minds and our wills. Discovering the will of God is no accident. Our understanding is involved (comp. 5:17). But it is also a moral issue involving our wills. “What pleases the Lord,” *euarestos*, well-pleasing, acceptable (cf. Romans 14:18; 2 Corinthians 5:9).
- B. **The Separation.** “Have nothing to do” is the word *sungkoinōneite*, a present imperative, literally no fellowship, partnership, close association, “with the fruitless deeds of darkness,” compare Galatians 5:19ff and Romans 2:7.
- C. **The Exposure.** “But rather expose them,” *elegchete*, present imperative, literally to convict or convince, to reprove, correct. Same word used of the Holy Spirit in John 16:8-11. Testing issues in the approval of the good and in the exposure of the evil. The believer must not only avoid evil, he must also expose it.
- D. **The Reason.** “For it is shameful,” *aischron*, literally disgrace (cf. 1 Corinthians 11:6) “even to mention what the disobedient do in secret.” It is the property of light to dispel darkness. The exposure is accomplished more by our lives (v. 9) than by our words.

IX. **THE PROCESS: MANIFESTATION AND DEMONSTRATION** (vv. 13-14). “A man who receives the light of Christ reflects it. He cannot receive it except so far as he has affinity with it, and he cannot receive it without reflecting it. The light is itself a purifying force. When it acts, it brings out all that is able to sustain its presence.”¹⁰ What effect does the light have?

- A. **Manifestation.** It shows the true nature of sin. The light reveals the obscure and hidden. When “exposed,” *phaneroō*, literally to make clear, to make known, to become visible, revealed.
- B. **Demonstration.** The light declares the sons of God. Light transforms. Paul makes reference to Isaiah 26:19 and 60:1 to illustrate the power of the light. Some have used this text to teach that the natural man has the ability (free-will) to respond to the Gospel. This ignores the context. Paul is declaring the power of the light (v. 14a). He is *not* stressing the power of the dead, who have no power.

CONCLUSION: Paul confronted people with the truth . . . and with its implications. To begin with, obedience to God's will involves sharp separation from the world. The world is in darkness as Calvin declared, "Again, in this world there is nothing but pitch darkness, and even so thick that we do not know how to step one pace without tumbling, or without straying out of our way. Therefore, it is necessary for us to be guided, and that our Lord Jesus Christ shows us the way. This is what St. Paul shows us here, and how our Lord Jesus enlightens us. It is not only that we are dim-sighted, and that he helps us and supplies the lack that is in us, but also that we are stark blind, yes and dead; in short, we are in the pit of hell. When a corpse is laid in the grave, men may bring candles and torches to it, but it never sees the more for all that. So then, our Lord Jesus imparts his light to us, not to make us see more clearly than we did before, but to give us our whole eyesight again, seeing that we are stark blind. Now then, seeing that Jesus Christ speaks in this way and continues day by day to waken us and make us see more clearly, ought we not to follow his example and restrain our neighbours as much as we can when we see them straying to their destruction?"¹¹

ENDNOTES

¹R. C. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture* (Intervarsity Press, 1977), p. 17. This is an excellent little book that I highly recommend for helping people in their personal Bible Study.

²John Owen, *The Causes, Ways, and Means of Understanding the Mind of God As Revealed in His Word, with Assurance Therein: and a Declaration of the Perspicuity of the Scriptures with the External Means of the Interpretation of Them. Works IV* (rpt. The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), pp. 124-125.

³G. Campbell-Morgan, *Notes on the Psalms* (Revell, 1917), p. 229.

⁴*Theological Workbook of the Old Testament I*, eds. R. L. Harris, G. L. Archer, B. K. Waltke (Moody, 1980), p. 103.

⁵Charles Bridges, *An Exposition of Psalm 19* (rpt. The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), p. 82.

⁶C. H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David VI* (rpt. Baker, 1978), p. 102.

⁷Erroll Hulse, *The Believer's Experience: Maintaining the Scriptural Balance Between Experience and Truth* (Zondervan, 1980), p. 134.

⁸J. Eadie, *A Commentary On the Greek Text of the Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians* (T & T Clark, 1883), p. 219.

⁹J. A. Robinson, *Commentary on Ephesians: Exposition of the Greek Text* (rpt. Kregel, 1979), p. 120.

¹⁰James Montgomery Boice, *Ephesians* (Baker, 1991), p. 162.

¹¹J. Calvin, *Sermons On the Epistle to the Ephesians* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1973), p. 533.