

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Scripture Memory		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	64		Gary L.W. Johnson
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KNOWING GOD'S WILL (Part II)

When the subject of the will of God comes up, it is important to clearly distinguish the two ways this is set forth in Scripture. The great Puritan preacher William Gouge long ago noted: "The will of God is that rule whereby all things are ordered that he himself doth, and whereby all things ought to be ordered that creatures do. Hereupon God's will is distinguished into his secret and revealed will. This distinction is grounded on these words, *The secret things belong unto the Lord our God, but those things that are revealed belong unto us*, Deut. xxix. 29. The secret will of God is called his *counsel*, Isa. xvi. 10; *the counsel of his will*, Eph. i. 11; *his purpose*, Rom. viii. 28; *his pleasure*, Isa. xlvi. 10; *his good pleasure*, Eph. i. 9; *the good pleasure of his will*, Eph. i. 5. The other is commonly called God's word, and that after the manner of men, because the ordinary means whereby men make known their minds is the word of their mouth; therefore the revelation of God's will is called God's word, whether it be by an audible voice from God himself, as Mat. iii. 17; or by the ministry of angels, ver. 2; or by the ministry of men, Hosea i. 2. This is also called *the good, acceptable, and perfect will of God*, Rom. xii. 2. This revealed will of God is that which is principally intended in the second petition of the Lord's prayer. Here God's secret will is meant; this is that supreme and absolute will of God, by which all things are, and without which nothing can be, Ps. cxv. 3; Eph. i. 11; Rom. xi. 34. This is God's only rule; he hath nothing else to regulate any purpose or act of his but his own will. As therefore he disposeth all things, so in special the gifts of the Holy Ghost, *according to his will*."¹

There is a close relationship between our two texts, since doing the revealed or perceptive will of God is grounded in knowing what the Bible teaches. "Life," writes Kent Hughes, "as we know, perpetually faces us with the problem of telling good from evil. Our spiritual perception is daily taxed. But a righteous life that feeds on the solid food of God's Word will be able to exercise mature judgment between what is good and what is evil."² Ephesians 5:15-17 states: "Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is." Paul here is giving his readers a command to be practical. "Making the most of the time" implies taking the best and most logical advantage of circumstances for the Lord's glory. "Understand" in v. 17 is the Greek term *suniete*, implying a rational process of discernment. John White tells us: "God does not desire to guide us magically. He wants us to know his mind. He wants us to grasp his very heart. We need minds so soaked with the content of Scripture, so imbued with biblical outlooks and principles, so sensitive to the Holy Spirit's prompting that we will know instinctively the upright step to take in any circumstance, small or great. . . . Through the study of [Scripture] you may become acquainted with the ways and thoughts of God."³

Hebrews 5:11-6:3 is the third warning. The writer has just previously (5:10) begun the subject of the Melchizedek priesthood. It can easily be seen that the author has been building toward this theme (2:17; 3:1; 4:14-16) and having now introduced it, he abruptly interjects the third warning (5:11-6:20), which is graver than the two which have already been given. The writer will treat the Melchizedek priesthood in full in 7:1 to 10:18, but for now he directs his attention to the apathetic condition of the Hebrews.

I. **REBUKE FOR SPIRITUAL IMMATURITY** (vv. 11-14).

A. **The Condition of the Hebrews.**

1. *We have much to say and it is hard to explain.* Not because the writer didn't know what he was talking about, nor because the doctrine was cloaked in an unpenetrable mystery, but because he doubts their ability to understand and accept the doctrine. Westcott points out that this doctrine, Christ's Priesthood and Sacrifice, is the main and most difficult subject of the epistle.⁴ The writer's part must be done; however, the Hebrews make it that much more difficult by their "Kindergarten maturity."⁵

Note: The writer was a concerned teacher. He cared about these Hebrew Christians enough to sternly rebuke them, so as to prompt them to action. Unlike some teachers who are only concerned with how they sound or with what kind of favorable impression they make on those who hear them, the writer to the Hebrews was a true teacher, concerned about those who heard him.

2. The problem with the Hebrews is one of being *dull of hearing* (from Gk. *nothros*, negative *ne* and *otheo*, to push; no push, in the hearing, slow and sluggish in mind as well as in the ears. In New Testament only here and 6:12 (slack, sluggish). Plato calls some students *nothroi* (stupid).⁶ It means slow moving in mind, torpid in understanding, dull of hearing, witlessly forgetful. It can be used of the numbed limbs of an animal which is ill. It can be used of a person who has the imperceptive nature of a stone.⁷

Note: The stress on *hearing* in this epistle. Hearing must also involve obedience . . . Three times (3:7, 15; 4:7) Psalm 95 is quoted: "O that today you hearken to His voice" (RSV), and context makes it clear that hearkening means obeying.⁸ The Hebrews were now in this condition. They *have become* (Moffatt: You have grown . . .)⁹ "by default," points out Hughes, "the implication being that this was not the case with them originally. They have become slack, and their slackness had affected their attentiveness and capacity to receive and retain solid instruction."¹⁰ They no longer responded to the Word of God, but like children, something else had captured their attention.

3. *By this time you ought to be teachers* (not spiritual gift), being able to give a reason for the hope in them (1 Pet. 3:15), able to understand the doctrines of the Word of God, and instruct younger believers. But they *need again* . . . "The habit," says John Brown, "of spiritual dullness of hearing not only prevents progress, but it absolutely produces retrogression."¹¹

- B. **The Remedy Prescribed.** The Hebrews need *someone to teach you the elementary principles* (Gk. *stoicheia*, means literally . . . "ABC's" . . . and carries the reproachful implication that those who are being addressed need to start again not even at chapter one, but, as it were, with the elements of the alphabet that precede chapter one¹²).

QUESTION: What are the ABC's? These are what the Hebrews need. They are referred to as *milk* in contrast to *solid food*.

ANSWER: In 6:1 the ABC's are called *the elementary teaching about Christ* "from which," says Hughes, "the readers are being exhorted to advance, may best be understood as referring to the first simple presentation of the gospel message."¹³ (This will be more fully dealt with later in this series on knowing the will of God.)

They were *not accustomed* (Gk. *apeiros*, without experience) *to the word of righteousness*. According to Hughes, this should be understood in a "theological sense, so that *the word of righteousness* indicates the teaching about righteousness which is fundamental to the Christian faith, namely, the insistence on Christ as our righteousness (1 Cor. 1:30; cf. 2 Cor. 5:21) as opposed to self-righteousness or works-righteousness (cf. Phil. 3:9; Tit. 3:5; Gal. 2:16; Rom. 3:21ff; Lk. 18:9ff).¹⁴ *For he is a babe* (not the Gk. word for child, *teknon*, but the word for an infant, *nepios*, according to Robertson this is like the Latin *infans*, infant, not able to talk.¹⁵ But the *mature*, those who *have their senses trained* (Gk. *gegumnasmen*, to exercise, our word "gymnasium" is derived from this word) to tell the difference between *good and evil*, this, says Hughes, "should not be understood merely in an ethical sense . . . but more particularly, as the context requires, in a comprehensive theological sense, namely of good and evil, or true and false, doctrine, which would include moral teaching."¹⁶

CONCLUSION: Ignorance of what the Bible teaches is the root of all error and spiritual decay. "God requires of those who live under the dispensation of the gospel," wrote the Puritan giant, John Owen, "that they should be skillful in the word of righteousness. To be skillful is to have a spiritual sense, taste, or relish, of the goodness, sweetness, useful excellency of the truths of the gospel endearing our hearts to God, and causing us to adhere unto him with delight and constancy."¹⁷ One of Owen's contemporaries, Petrus Van Mastricht, wrote that a mind fortified with Scripture "supplies consolation and builds patience in any adversities to reflect that (1) no matter what kind and how great those adversities are, they come to us neither contingently, with the Deity unaware and unwilling, nor by a necessity of fate, which not even God himself can resist, but by the most free good pleasure of the supreme arbiter, in whose most free, most just, and also most merciful dispensation it is entirely necessary and just that we rest, unless we wish, by an abominable sin, to thrust down the self-determined will of God beneath our fleshly mind. (2) Day by day we are to come back to God in our prayers, asking that his will be accomplished (Matt. 6:10; Acts 21:14). (3) We have need of endurance, that we might do the will of God and might receive the promise (Heb. 10:36). (4) Toward this very end is every evil sent to us by God, that we might be accustomed to his most free will and to his most absolute authority over us, and that we might rest in it (Job 1:12, cf. v. 21). Finally, (5) by humble submission and patience, the most free good will of God, at whose nod all these calamities are conveyed to us and can also be taken away or directed to our advantage, can be reconciled to us (2 Sam. 15:15). From this sort of devout meditation on the divine will, many have drawn solace in every most pressing adversity: Eli (1 Sam. 3:18), David (Ps. 39:9; 2 Sam. 16:10), and even the Savior himself (Matt. 26:39)."¹⁸

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Wm. Gouge, *Commentary on Hebrews* (rpt. Kregel, 1980), p. 110.
- ² R. Kent Hughes, *Preaching The Word: Hebrews I* (Crossway, 1993), p. 150.
- ³ John White, as cited by M. B. Smith, *Knowing God's Will: Biblical Principles of Guidance* (IVP, 1929), p. 59.
- ⁴ B. F. Westcott, *The Epistle To The Hebrews* (rpt. Eerdmans, 1972), p. 132.
- ⁵ P. E. Hughes, *The Epistle To The Hebrews* (Eerdmans, 1974), p. 190.
- ⁶ A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in The New Testament V* (Eerdmans, 1937), p. 371.
- ⁷ Wm. Barclay, *Hebrews* (Westminster Press, 1957), p. 49.
- ⁸ H. K. Moulton, *The Challenge of the Concordance* (Bagster, 1976), p. 170.
- ⁹ James Moffett, *Commentary on Hebrews* (T & T Clark, 1975), p. 69.
- ¹⁰ P. E. Hughes, *op. cit.* p. 189.
- ¹¹ John Brown, *Exposition of Hebrews* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1980), p. 265.
- ¹² P. E. Hughes, *op. cit.* p. 190.
- ¹³ *Ibid.* p. 195.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.* p. 191.
- ¹⁵ Robertson, *op. cit.* p. 371.
- ¹⁶ P. E. Hughes, *op. cit.* p. 193.
- ¹⁷ *The Works of John Owen XX* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1991), p. 89.
- ¹⁸ P. Van Mastricht, *Theoretical-Practical Theology*, trans. T. M. Rester (Reformation Heritage Books, 2019), p. 324.