

Series: *Colossians – Christ Above All*

Title: "Not *Gnosis* But *Epignosis*: Abundant, Precise, Correct Knowledge of God's Will"

Speaker: Rev. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 06/28/2009

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Introduction

In our last message, we began our study of Colossians chapter one and verse nine. Remember, once again, that it is Paul's inspired intention throughout this entire book of Colossians to exalt the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ – Christ above all.

He began the book in verse one by stating that he is an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God and thus he speaks with Christ's authority, and not on his own authority.

He continued in verses three through eight by reminding the Colossian believers that because they have believed the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, because they have believed on the Lord Jesus Christ as their Savior from sin and damnation, because they not only heard the words, but believed the Gospel as the truth – because of that, everything has changed for them. The Gospel is bearing fruit among them.

The Gentiles among them are no longer pagans, they are no longer under the bondage of the empty worship of false deities. The Jews who are among them – and as we shall see in a later message it is clear that there were some – the Jews among them are no longer merely Jews according to the flesh, Jews under the bondage of the ceremonial law. Both Jew and Gentile in Colosse have been made one and made free to serve a new Master, the Lord Jesus Christ.

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And then we come to verses nine through twelve, and I want to read them for you once again, because those verses form a single sentence. We're taking that long sentence and breaking it down into digestible pieces, but we need to keep in mind the entire thought as we do that. So I trust that you will read along with me, if you are able to do that as you listen, as I read once again Colossians chapter one, verses nine through twelve:

- 9. For this reason we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding;**
- 10. that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God;**
- 11. strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, for all patience and longsuffering with joy;**
- 12. giving thanks to the Father who has qualified us to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in the light.**

Now in our last message we began to focus on verse nine, and I gave you an expanded translation of the original Greek text. I want to give that to you again also today. As I do this, I can't help feeling that I'm doing something like a waiter in a fine restaurant would do, as he brings out all the dishes of a great feast and sets them down on the table in front of you. The Greek text of this particular verse

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is indeed the spiritual equivalent of a rich feast made up of several different dishes, and I want to set the table for you as we continue our study of verse nine. An expanded translation of the Greek would read like this:

“On account of the hope that is laid up for you – the inheritance that is ours because we are in Christ – on account of that, Timothy and I, from the day we heard about the fact that you have trusted in Christ, we do not permit ourselves to cease praying for you, desiring that you may be liberally supplied with the precise, correct, and thorough knowledge of God's will – His intent and purpose – in all spiritual wisdom in the broad sense, and in all spiritual understanding in the more specific sense, joining together in your minds the things that you have learned, are learning, and will learn about God.”

Six Propositional Truths

Now you'll remember from last time that we said that this is a big statement. It is a very weighty statement. It is a feast. It's a lot to try to swallow in one bite. So in order to break it down into digestible parts, I framed the details of verse nine into a set of propositional statements. And I gave you six of them.

The first was this: Believing the Gospel of Christ makes knowledge of God's will possible. We talked about that in some detail last time, and we brought in an explanatory passage from First Corinthians chapter two. We saw that knowledge of God's will is impossible for the unsaved man. Spiritually speaking, the unsaved man doesn't have a clue about the will of God. It is only as God the Holy Spirit

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takes up residence in the heart of a person who has believed on the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation from sin – it is only then that the spiritual lights come on, and the individual can truly understand the will of God. Believing the Gospel of Christ is what makes knowledge of God's will possible. That was proposition number one.

Proposition number two was this: Precise and correct knowledge of God's will is possible. Not some nebulous knowledge, but precise and correct knowledge. We saw that that is the meaning of the word that is translated "knowledge" in our English Bibles in verse nine. The common Greek word for knowledge was *gnosis*. It's the root word from which we get English words like diagnosis – analytical knowledge, and prognosis – foreknowledge. Normally, in Greek, if you wanted to talk about knowledge, you simply used the word *gnosis*. But Paul doesn't use that word here in verse nine. He says, my prayer is not that you will simply have knowledge, *gnosis* – my desire is that you will have *epignosis* – full knowledge, complete knowledge, accurate knowledge.

Paul uses the same word in a number of other places. In Romans 3:20 he says that by the law is the knowledge, the *epignosis*, of sin – the law gives us the full understanding of the sinfulness of sin. In Romans chapter ten and verse two he says that the unsaved Jews have a zeal for God, but it is not a zeal according to knowledge, *epignosis*, a full and accurate knowledge of God. The unsaved Jews don't have that, Paul says. And Peter, in Second Peter chapter two, verse twenty says that Christians escape the pollutions of the world through the knowledge – the

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epignosis, the full and complete and accurate knowledge – of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Precise and correct knowledge of God's will is possible. That is proposition number two.

Proposition number three from the original language of verse nine is this: Precise and correct knowledge of God's will comes because of two things – prayer and the Word of God.

And then we have proposition number four: Knowledge of God's will involves wisdom in the general sense.

And then proposition number five: Knowledge of God's will involves understanding in the specific sense, an understanding that involves joining aspects of God's revelation together in the mind.

And then finally, proposition number six: The Christian's knowledge of God's will is superior to the world's false and speculative knowledge and wisdom.

Not *Gnosis* But *Eignosis*

I want to focus our attention now on proposition number three: Precise and correct knowledge of God's will – knowledge that is not merely *gnosis* but *epignosis* – that kind of knowledge comes because of two things: prayer, and the Word of God. The two go hand in hand. They are inseparable in the Christian life. Prayer – proper prayer – and the reading and study of the Word of God.

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Knowing God's Will Through the Means of Prayer

Let me explain what I mean by proper prayer. Paul was praying for the Colossians that they would have this kind of accurate, complete, and abundant knowledge of the will of God. By saying this to the Colossians, Paul is establishing a model for their own praying. Paul says, I am praying for this for you. And by implication, Paul is saying, this is something that you yourselves should be praying for, and seeking after.

This is also the focus of the model prayer that the Lord Jesus Christ gave to us in Matthew chapter six, beginning at verse nine. Most people refer to it as "the Lord's prayer" but that's not really a proper name for it. If any prayer deserves the title of "the Lord's prayer" it is Jesus' high priestly prayer in John chapter 17. This prayer is the model prayer given by Christ to believers. This is not a prayer we are to pray as such. It is Jesus' demonstration, if you will, of how we are to pray. Jesus says, "Pray after this pattern." It is a how-to lesson on proper prayer.

We could spend several messages just on that prayer. But I want to focus our attention on one thing in particular about it. If we were to put just one word over that prayer, one word that describes it the most accurately, I think that word would be submission: "Our Father, who art in Heaven, *hallowed* be Thy name." May Thy name be exalted, Father. "*Thy* kingdom come" – Father, may your kingdom be the thing that has priority in my life. "*Thy* will be done in earth, as it is in Heaven" –

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not my will, Father, but Thy will, be done. Jesus himself prayed to the Father in just those words.

What is the purpose of those words in Jesus' model prayer? Their purpose is to get us properly oriented before we ask anything of God in prayer. Their purpose, if you will, is to get your spiritual compass pointing to true north, pointing in the direction of desiring and seeking after accurate and complete and abundant knowledge of the will of God. That is the attitude you need to have before you ask anything of Him. That is the attitude you need to have before you open the covers of your Bible to read and study and absorb the truth of His Word: Father, I want you to be exalted. I want Christ to be truly preeminent in my life. I want your will to be done, I you're your kingdom to have the priority, because I know that there is absolutely nothing better in heaven or on earth for me than for your perfect plan to be accomplished in this world, and for your will to be accomplished in me and through me as your beloved child.

Knowledge of God's will – *epignosis* knowledge – comes through proper prayer. Submissive prayer.

Knowing God's Will Through the Study of His Word

And coupled closely with that, we find that abundant and accurate and complete knowledge of God's will comes through the reading and study of His Word. What does Paul say further on in Colossians, in chapter three and verse sixteen? "Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom." "Thy Word," the psalmist says,

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"is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path." "Wherewith shall a young man cleanse his way?" the psalmist asks in Psalm 119 verse 9. And he gives the answer: "By taking heed according to Thy Word." "The entrance of Thy Word giveth light" – Psalm 119:130 – "It giveth understanding unto the simple." "Order my steps in Thy Word" – verse 133 – "and let not any iniquity have dominion over me."

Dear Christian friend, I am sure that you have problems today. I am sure that you have concerns today. I am sure that you have questions that you are wrestling with, desiring to know and understand the will of God. If you say that you aren't in that position as you listen to me today, then I think you'd better stop and take your pulse, because I'm not sure you're actually alive. Every Christian has problems. Every Christian has concerns. Every Christian has questions. Some of them are much more weighty and difficult than others. But we all have matters where we are seeking to understand and pursue the will of God, if we are truly following Christ today.

But dear Christian friend, in the midst of those questionings and wrestlings, never lose sight of what you have as a believer on the Lord Jesus Christ. You have the truth. Christianity is an exclusive faith. Christianity says that it, and it alone, has the truth of God, and that the truth of God is to be found only in the Word of God. God's Word makes that claim everywhere from beginning to end.

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And the fact that Christianity is an exclusive religion and the Bible is the exclusive Word of God means that you don't need to add anything to it. You don't need to add a little bit of psychology, or a little bit of human philosophy, or a little bit of some other religion, because the Bible itself and the Bible alone is complete, it is entire, it is self-contained, and it is sufficient.

And that is why it is so important for us to understand the Word of God. That is why it is so important for us to be constantly searching the Scriptures. And not only to search the Scriptures and understand the Scriptures, but to apply the Scriptures to our lives. The Bible is an exceedingly practical Book. "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God," Paul says in Second Timothy chapter three, verse sixteen, "and is *profitable*." It is valuable. It is useful. Valuable above anything we can measure. The profitable Word of God.

And, Paul says, it is profitable for four things. It is profitable for *doctrine*, that is, for teaching. For teaching you the path in which you are to go. And secondly it is profitable for *reproof* – it is profitable for showing you when you have gotten off the right path. And thirdly it is profitable for *correction* – once God's Word shows you the right path, and shows you when you have gotten off the right path, it corrects you, it shows you how to get back on the right path. And finally, God's Word is profitable for *instruction in righteousness* – that is, for keeping you on the right path, the path of God's righteousness.

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Three Principles of God's Guidance

Now you might have a question in your mind right now, a question that goes something like this: God guides Christians through His Word, yes. But doesn't God also guide Christians' lives through circumstances? And the answer to that question is, Yes, God certainly does do that. We call that God's providence. God is sovereign. God is in control of all things. But we as human beings also have a will, and the fact that we have a will is not in conflict with the fact that God is sovereign over all things. He is sovereign, but He has not reduced His creatures to being nothing more than robots.

But we need to remember something very important about God's guidance through circumstances. And I want to state it to you in the form of three principles regarding God's guidance. You need to always keep these principles in mind when you are dealing with the question of how to know the will of God.

Principle Number One is this: God guides through Scripture. We've already seen that from the many passages we've been quoting. God guides through Scripture.

Principle Number Two of God's guidance is this: God also guides through circumstances. We live in a real world where God's providence is continually in operation. We have many, many examples of God's providence in the Scriptures. God sent Joseph as a slave into Egypt ahead of his brethren so that the nation of Israel might be saved from dying out through famine. Joseph's brothers meant it

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for evil, but in the end it became clear that God meant it for good. And God orchestrated a vast and complex set of circumstances to bring about the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ in just the right place at just the right time in human history, and in just the right way so that all the prophecies concerning His miraculous birth would be fulfilled. And God is orchestrating events and circumstances in your own life today.

So God guides through His Word, and God guides through circumstances. Those are the first two principles of God's guidance. But there is a third very vital principle that you must never forget.

Principle Number Three of God's guidance is this: God's guidance through circumstances never contradicts holy Scripture. Let me say that again: God's guidance through circumstances never contradicts holy Scripture. I've heard people say, "Well, Scripture is one thing. But I live in the real world. I have to be practical." What they're really saying is, "I know what the Bible says, but because of this particular situation that I'm in, I need to ignore Scripture, or I need to bend it a little bit, or twist it a little bit." I have to be practical.

Dear friend, if you see your circumstances as dictating that you need to do something that is contrary to Scripture, then you are looking at the circumstances in the wrong way. You are letting circumstances become your authority. No – Scripture governs circumstances, not the other way around. Hebrews 4:12 tells us that it is Scripture that is the discerner, or the critic, of the thoughts and intents of

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the heart. Scripture must govern our comprehension of the circumstances that God sets before us. Circumstances are never an excuse to ignore Scripture. Circumstances are never an excuse to compromise the Scriptural way of conducting our lives.

Precise and correct knowledge of God's will comes because of two things – proper, submissive prayer, and the reading and study of the Word of God. That's a big part of the message of Colossians chapter one and verse nine. And as we continue next time, we're going to see that knowledge of God's will involves both spiritual wisdom and spiritual understanding, and these are two very important concepts for us to get hold of, as we move on next time in our study of how to truly know God's will.