

Series: *Colossians – Christ Above All*

Title: "Exercising Spiritual Intelligence"

Speaker: Rev. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 7/5/2009

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Introduction

Right now in our series on the book of Colossians, we are focusing on verse nine of chapter one. And in particular we are focusing on this matter of knowing the will of God.

Once again I want to take a moment to remind you of where we have been so far in our study. In Colossians chapter one, verses three through eight, Paul has reminded the Colossian believers that because they have believed on the Lord Jesus Christ as their Savior from sin and from eternal death, everything has changed for them. They are new people. They now have a hope laid up for them in Heaven. And the Gospel is bringing forth fruit among them.

And beginning in verse nine of chapter one, the Apostle Paul makes it clear to the Colossian believers that because they are now Christians, it is possible for them to know the will of God. That wasn't possible before. They had no spiritual light. They were in darkness. They were without hope. But now they have light, and now they have hope – firm, settled confidence of eternity – in Christ. And so Paul can tell them that he is praying for them, and he is praying for something that is entirely possible, and should be entirely normal, in the Christian life. As he says beginning at verse nine, we "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."

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Now I've been putting before you six propositional truths that come out of, and are supported by, the original language of verse nine. Thus far we have covered three of the six, and today we're going to cover two more, which will leave us with one great and final point about verse nine for next time.

The first three propositions were these:

Number one: Believing the Gospel of Christ is what makes knowledge of God's will possible. That's what opens the door. Nothing else can do it. You can't know God's will unless you are a Christian. You can't know God's will unless God the Holy Spirit has taken up residence within you, and that is what occurs when every Christian becomes a Christian. That is *how* you become a Christian. God the Holy Spirit takes up residence within you, regenerates you, and begins the process of conforming you more and more to the image of Christ.

Proposition number two is that 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*. Normally, in Greek, if you wanted to talk about knowledge, you simply used the word *gnosis*. Basic knowledge. But Paul doesn't use that word here in verse nine. He says, my prayer is *not* that you will simply have knowledge, *gnosis* – but my desire is that you will have *epignosis* – that's the word that's used here, and it means full knowledge, complete knowledge, accurate knowledge.

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Our third proposition is that 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: proper prayer, and the reading and study of the Word of God. The two go hand in hand. They are inseparable in the Christian life.

We talked about what the Bible means by *proper* prayer. We looked at the model prayer given to us by our Lord in Matthew chapter six. And we saw that the one theme word we can put over that entire prayer is the word *submission* – “*hallowed* be Thy name” – “*Thy* kingdom come” – “*Thy* will be done in earth, as it is in Heaven” – and so on. We need to get our minds and spirits properly oriented before we ask anything of God in prayer. You need to get your spiritual compass pointing to true north, as it were, 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, Your kingdom to have the priority, because I know that there is absolutely nothing better.

And we saw that we need to prayerfully make *profitable* use of Scripture – for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, so that each of us may be thoroughly equipped to not only *know* God's will, but to *do* it.

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And we saw that there are three principles of God's guidance. First of all, God guides primarily through Scripture. This Book tells us how to think. This Book tells us how to live. And secondly, God also guides through circumstances, through providence. He is working all things together for His glory and for our good. But we also saw a third principle of God's guidance, and that is the fact that God's guidance through circumstances never contradicts God's guidance from the unchangeable Scriptures.

And therefore, if you think your circumstances are 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 instead of Scripture. Scripture governs how we are to deal with 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 the heart. Scripture must govern our comprehension of the circumstances that God sets before us. Circumstances are never an excuse to compromise the Scriptural way of thinking, the Scriptural way of conducting our lives. Every Christian must first and always be a Scripture-driven Christian.

So we've covered our first three propositions derived from the text of verse nine. And now we move on to the remaining three.

Proposition number four is that knowledge of God's will involves *wisdom* in the *general* sense. It has to do with general principles.

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And proposition number five is the companion to it: Knowledge of God's will involves *understanding* in the *specific* sense, and it is an understanding that involves joining aspects of God's revelation together in the mind. And it has to do with taking the knowledge that we derive from God's revelation in Scripture, and applying it to particular cases, particular situations.

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.

The Colossians' Situation

Now in order for us to understand what the Apostle Paul is saying here in verse nine, we need to remember once again some of the cultural background of the book of Colossians. The Colossian believers were dealing with some serious challenges to their new-found Christian faith. And one of those challenges was the false teaching of an early form of Gnosticism. The false teachers promised the Colossian believers that they would be part of a special "in" group, with special knowledge that was not to be found in Scripture. These false teachers used words like *knowledge*, *wisdom*, and *spiritual understanding*, so Paul uses these words to make his case against them.

False teachers are like their father the Devil. They misappropriate the Bible's vocabulary, but they don't use the Bible's definitions. The Biblical definitions of the terms Paul is using here were well established in the Old Testament Scriptures. Look at the Psalms in particular, and the early chapters of Proverbs. They are full

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of the terms “knowledge” – “wisdom” – and “understanding.” And they give the definitions of those words that Paul uses here in Colossians.

Look, for example, at Proverbs chapter two, beginning at verse one, where all three of these terms occur:

- 1. My son, if you receive my words, and treasure my commands within you,**
- 2. So that you incline your ear to wisdom, and apply your heart to understanding;**
- 3. Yes, if you cry out for discernment, and lift up your voice for understanding,**
- 4. If you seek her as silver, and search for her as for hidden treasures;**
- 5. Then you will understand the fear of the Lord, and find the knowledge of God.**
- 6. For the Lord gives wisdom; from His mouth come knowledge and understanding;**
- 7. He stores up sound wisdom for the upright; He is a shield to those who walk uprightly;**
- 8. He guards the paths of justice, and preserves the way of His saints.**

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9. Then you will understand righteousness and justice, equity and every good path.

10. When wisdom enters your heart, and knowledge is pleasant to your soul,

11. Discretion will preserve you; understanding will keep you.

Spiritual Wisdom

Now here in Colossians chapter one and verse nine, as we have it in our English Bibles, Paul says the he is praying that these believers will be filled with the knowledge of God's will "in all wisdom and spiritual understanding." In the original language, that word "spiritual" actually applies to both words, wisdom and understanding. Paul is really saying, "in all spiritual wisdom, and in all spiritual understanding."

Now we've said that our fourth proposition out of verse nine is that knowledge of God's will involves *wisdom* in the *general* sense. That's the sense of the word that's used here in the original language. It's the word *sophia*, which means broad and general wisdom.

Now the Greeks and later pagans worshipped a goddess named Sophia – the goddess of wisdom. And in the second century the Gnostics would come to teach the ultimate blasphemy, that the goddess Sophia was the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. They would teach blasphemy against the Holy Spirit.

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But Paul is making it clear to the Colossian believers that they are to have no part in this pagan idolatry of Sophia, or wisdom, as a goddess. True wisdom, Paul says, comes from God. That's what I'm praying for, for you Colossian believers. Don't let anyone cheat you out of true wisdom, God's wisdom, the Bible's wisdom, by drawing you away into this mixture of pagan philosophy and Christianity. I am praying that you will be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom.

And the sense of this word *sophia* in the original language has to do with discernment with regard to general principles. Discernment with regard to general principles. The understanding that the *general* will of God for believers is given to us clearly in the Bible, and in all the necessary detail. The general sense of right and wrong. The general sense of what pleases God and does not please God. The general understanding of what constitutes sound doctrine, and what constitutes heresy. The general understanding of what is right and proper in the life and worship of the church, and what is not. Paul is going to talk about those things in some detail in chapter two.

Also, the general sense of how we should conduct our lives as Christians – how the Christian mind should think, what Christian character looks like, how a Christian is to conduct himself before unbelievers, how a Christian is to conduct himself in the home, how the Christian is to conduct himself in the workplace, how the Christian is to conduct himself in relation to other believers. Paul is going to talk about all of these things in more detail in chapters three and four.

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You know, if you understand the general principles of God's Word, if you read it and study it so that the Bible's way of thinking becomes your way of thinking – you'll have probably ninety percent of your answers to your questions about what the will of God is for your life. Am I making a decision, am I following a path, that conforms to the general principles for Christian life and thinking and conduct that are laid down in the pages of Scripture? Asking and answering those kinds of questions based on the authority of the Word of God is what the Apostle Paul calls here *spiritual wisdom*.

Spiritual Understanding

What then, about the last two words of verse nine – “spiritual understanding”? How does this differ from “spiritual wisdom”? Well, the Greek word that is used here for “understanding” is *sunesis*. *Sunesis*. It's a compound word made up of the root word *hiemi*, which means “to bring”, and the prefix *sun*, which means “together”. So the basic meaning of the word for “understanding” in verse nine is “to bring together.”

The idea behind the word in this context is the Christian using the mind, using the intelligence, to bring together various aspects of our knowledge of God's general will as revealed in God's Word, and bringing that combined knowledge to bear on a specific situation. The *specific* will of God for any given situation will *always* agree with the total body of truth that God has set down in His Word. The better you know God's Word, the better you will know God's general will. And

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the better you know God's general will, the easier it will be to discern His specific guidance in your daily life.

Notice here what Paul was *not* doing. He was *not* encouraging the Colossian believers to go off after the kind of false knowledge and wisdom that the pagans were promoting. He wasn't praying that they would see visions or hear voices. Paul's prayer for the Colossian believers was that they would get deeper into God's Word, and that by the power and authority of God's Word alone they would be filled with wisdom and insight concerning God's will.

He wanted them to have "all wisdom." That didn't mean they were going to know everything. But it did mean that they would have all the wisdom necessary to exercise their minds in a Scripture-driven way for making decisions and living a life that would please God.

Spiritual Intelligence

What Paul is talking about here in Colossians 1:9 is spiritual intelligence. That is what God wants us to have. God doesn't ask you to put your mind in mothballs when you become a Christian. He doesn't ask you to put your intellect in the deep freeze. God doesn't place a premium on ignorance. Believing on the Lord Jesus Christ liberates Christians to use their minds in a way that the unbeliever can't even understand. And God's Word equips believers to do that. It is God's Word that equips the Scripture-driven Christian, and the Scripture-driven church. God wants you to use your mind, driven by Scripture, to live a godly and fruitful life

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for His glory. And God wants this for every Christian, not just some elite group. You don't have a Bible college or seminary degree to be a Scripture-driven Christian who is filled with the knowledge of God's will.

In the eyes of the world, Peter and the other apostles were uneducated and untrained men. But we read in Acts chapter four that as they preached and taught in the early days of the church, the Pharisees – the educated men of the day, but men who were lost and spiritually dead and didn't know how to think God's thoughts – those men marveled because these uneducated, untrained apostles could preach with such power and live with such boldness. And Acts 4:13 tells us that they took note of the fact that these men, Peter and John and the rest, "had been with Jesus."

And the same was true of the Apostle Paul. By human standards, he was a highly educated man. But he told the Galatian church, I'm not giving you my own wisdom, not my own understanding of things. I'm giving you the knowledge of the will of God that I received directly from Jesus Christ. I've been with Jesus.

That's what we need today. We need to develop spiritual intelligence. Not a puffed-up intellectualism. Not the kind of intellectualism that the Apostle Paul condemned when he spoke of those who were "ever learning, but never coming to the knowledge of the truth." We need to be with Jesus. And the way to be with Jesus, the way to have the mind of Christ, and to know God's will, is to be in God's Word.
