

Series: *Colossians – Christ Above All*

Title: "The Riches of the Full Assurance of Understanding"

Speaker: Dr. Paul M. Elliott

Original Air Date: Week of 9/19/2010

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A Very Important Statement

Let me begin today by taking you once again to the very important statement that we find at the beginning of Colossians chapter two, verses one through three. The Apostle Paul writes this to the Colossian church, and to us as believers today:

I want you to know what a great conflict I have for you and those in Laodicea, and for as many as have not seen my face in the flesh, that their hearts may be encouraged, being knit together in love, and attaining to all riches of the full assurance of understanding, to the knowledge of the mystery of God, both of the Father and of Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. (Colossians 2:1-3)

The importance of these verses is that, in them, we find four pillars of Christian unity. Let me state them for you once again.

First, there is the pillar of facts. We have seen in previous messages that Christianity is a matter of the heart, but it is not a matter of mere feelings. It is a matter of facts, of knowledge, of reasoned belief resulting in renewing of the mind, redirection of the will, and a resolve to walk worthy of Christ.

Second, there is the pillar of love. We have seen in previous messages that the love of which Paul speaks here is *agape* love, self-sacrificial love. Love for Christ because He first loved us. And love for the body of Christ because every believer is precious in His sight, and therefore every believer must be precious in our site.

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Third, there is the pillar of understanding, and that is the point we are going to address today.

And fourth there is the pillar of knowledge, and the Lord willing we'll address that in our next message.

What Paul is actually saying at the beginning of Colossians chapter two is that Christians need to be knit together in love, they need to be knit together in understanding, and they need to be knit together in knowledge. In the original Greek of these verses, the words "knit together" apply to all three. These three things – love, understanding, and knowledge – all of them based on facts and not on mere feelings – these are the things that unify believers in Christ. There is one kind of love. There is one kind of understanding. There is one kind of knowledge. All three of them are rooted and grounded in the truth as it is found only in the preeminent Lord Jesus Christ.

The Third Pillar of Christian Unity

So today I want to focus your attention on what Paul has to say about this third pillar of Christian unity, the pillar of understanding. He speaks of it in this way: "all the riches of the full assurance of understanding." A more literal rendering would read like this: "all the abundant and invaluable wealth that is to be found in the absolutely complete and certain confidence and conviction of the understanding".

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When Paul speaks of understanding – this third pillar of Christian unity – it recapitulates what he said in the previous chapter, in Colossians chapter one, beginning at verse nine. Let me read those verses for you:

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; that you may walk worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing Him, being fruitful in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all might, according to His glorious power, for all patience and longsuffering with joy...

Here Paul also uses the word “understanding” – he speaks of “all wisdom and spiritual understanding” – and it is the same word in the Greek that he uses at the beginning of chapter two. The word for understanding in the Greek literally means, “to bring together.” To have and to exercise understanding means that you as a Christian are to use your mind, you are to use your intelligence, to bring together various aspects of your knowledge of God’s general will as it is revealed in His Word, and you are to bring that combined knowledge of Scripture to bear upon specific situations that you confront, in your own personal life, in your family life, in the workplace, in the life of the church – anywhere, and everywhere. And this is something that should be true not only for the Christian individually, but for the church as a body.

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It is important here also to note a general principle that Christians and churches sometimes forget: 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. There will never be a contradiction. There will never be a paradox. The better you know God's Word, the better you will know God's general will. And the better you know God's general will, the easier it will be for you to discern God's specific will for specific situations.

Notice also that in chapter two Paul does not merely use the word "understanding" by itself. He speaks of "*all the riches of the full assurance of understanding.*" As he often does, by divine inspiration the Apostle Paul piles on the words to make his point. This is what he is saying: My desire for you is that you will have "all the wealth, all the fullness, all the abundance, all the vast benefits, that derive from the absolutely certain confidence of the understanding" of Christ and His Word. That is what the individual Christian must seek after. That is what the church as a body must seek after.

Now, I want to expound this further for you by way of application. I want to talk about how this pillar of understanding, this third pillar of Christian unity, is so very relevant as we confront two particular problems that many Christians, and many churches, are facing today.

The Prosperity "Gospel" – Ignorance in Place of Understanding

The first one is this. In our time, so many churches are preaching a prosperity "gospel" – a name-it-and-claim-it "gospel" – a speak-good-things-into-existence

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“gospel” instead of the one true Gospel. You find this all over television and radio. They are preaching that the goal of the so-called Christian life is to have physical health, to have material wealth, to have personal success, to have a psychological uplift. And these preachers say that if you truly belong to God, you *will* have these things. In fact, not only will God give them to you, *you* will be able to give them to yourself. *You* will be able to bring these things to pass. If you don’t have these things, these people say, it is because there is something wrong with *you*.

But Christian, that is not what we find in the Bible. God may give you physical health – or, He may withdraw it for a time, to accomplish His plan and purposes, as he did with the Apostle Paul, and God gave him a thorn in the flesh instead. Christian, God may give you material wealth – or, He may remove it, as God did with Job for a time. Christian, God may give you a sense of personal success in the world’s terms, as He did with Solomon – or, He may bring you to a point where you think you are a failure, as happened to Peter; but then Jesus encouraged him and lifted him up. Christian, God may permit you to experience psychological uplift, as David often did. And yet there may be other times when you want to join in David’s cry in Psalm 88, where he said, “My soul is full of troubles...I am like a man who has no strength...You have laid me in the lowest pit.” As David said in Psalm 130, “Out of the depths I have cried unto Thee, O Lord.”

What do you do in times like that? What do you do in the dark periods of life? What do you do when health fails? What do you do when you find that a downturn in the economy or the loss of a job has eaten up much of what you had saved for

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retirement, or for some other purpose? What do you do, how do you think about God and about yourself, when spiritual depression comes? What do you think, when it seems that in human terms you are a failure? Do you think that God has forsaken you? Do you think that there is something wrong with you? Do you think that God is finished with you? Do you think you're not saved? Do you think that God has failed you?

Dear friend, listen to me carefully. Those kinds of thoughts are inevitable if you buy into the health-and-wealth, name-it-and-claim-it false gospels that are being preached today. The reason is that those false gospels, testify to a *poverty* of understanding of God and His Word, not the riches of the confident assurance in all circumstances, that comes with a true understanding of God and His Word.

What did Paul say when God withdrew his physical health and replaced it with a thorn in the flesh? He took God at His word when He said this, as Paul records it in Second Corinthians chapter twelve: "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness" (2 Corinthians 12:9). And so we read in the next verses that Paul responded with understanding. He said, "Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:9-10). That is Paul's testimony of the riches of the full assurance of understanding.

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What did Job say when God took away not only his wealth, but also his loved ones and his health? Job clearly didn't understand everything, but he understood that God was at work, even in such great adversity. He said: " 'Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return there. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.' " And Scripture tells us that "in all this Job did not sin nor charge God with wrong" (Job 1:21-22). Job testified of confidence in God, despite everything. He said, "I know that my Redeemer lives, and He shall stand at last on the earth; and after my skin is destroyed, this I know, that in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. How my heart yearns within me!" (Job 19:25-27). That is Job's testimony of the riches of the full assurance of understanding.

At times David cried out from the depths of despair, but he also gives this testimony, in the opening verses of Psalm 40: "I waited patiently for the LORD; and He inclined to me, and heard my cry. He also brought me up out of a horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my steps. He has put a new song in my mouth — even praise to our God; many will see it and fear, and will trust in the LORD. Blessed is that man who makes the LORD his trust, and does not respect the proud, nor such as turn aside to lies. Many, O LORD my God, are Your wonderful works which You have done; and Your thoughts toward us cannot be recounted to You in order; if I would declare and speak of them, they are more than can be numbered" (Psalm 40:1-5). That is David's testimony of the riches of the full assurance of understanding.

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The health-and-wealth, name-it-and-claim-it false gospels teach the direct opposite of these things. These false gospels do not teach the riches of the full assurance of understanding. No, they cultivate the spiritual poverty, and the misplaced confidence in the flesh, and the fearful doubting of God in adversity, and all of the other wrong thoughts that can come into the heart of the believer, and into the thinking of the church, because of ignorance of Christ and His Word.

Six times in his epistles, the Apostle Paul uses a particular attention-getting phrase. He says, "I do not want you to be ignorant, brethren." I want you to have understanding. I want you to be unified in understanding. God does not want you to walk in ignorance, as so many people who call themselves Christians are doing today. God wants you to walk in the riches of the full assurance of understanding of Christ and His Word.

The Secular Mind: Intimidating the Church

And this now brings me to a second matter of application. Today you often hear people express the idea that becoming a Christian, or living as a Christian, means that you have to put your mind in mothballs. I heard one television talk show host put it this way: "Christians suffer from a neurological disorder that stops people from thinking...The church is a crutch for weak-minded people who need strength in numbers." That is what many people think today. They think you have to turn off your brain to become a Christian. You have to quit thinking in order to be a member of the body of Christ.

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Today many Christians and even many congregations are intimidated by secular humanists and other people in our society who say these things. These people make a great pretense, a great show, of having an understanding of life, an understanding of the world, that is superior to the understanding that comes through Christ – or at least, so they think. They ridicule Biblical Christianity. They look down on Bible-believing Christians. They scoff at anyone who says that the Bible is the inspired, inerrant, infallible, uniquely authoritative Word of God. They laugh at anyone who says that the universe was created, out of nothing, by the spoken word of God just a few thousand years ago. They mock at God's law; they reject Biblical morality.

But what is at the heart of all of that vehement ridicule and rejection? There is one thing – and in fact, it is one Person. These people reject the Lord Jesus Christ. Christ is the issue. Christ is the dividing line. Ask them about Christ. Ask them about the knowledge of Christ. These people ridicule anyone who says that Jesus Christ is God Himself. They laugh at anyone who says that Christ alone is the answer to this world's problems. They mock at the preeminence of Christ – "I am the one and only Way, I am the one and only Truth, I am the one and only Life. No man comes to the Father but by Me." They laugh at the idea that one day they will face Christ at His judgment seat – but they will.

Dear friend, here in the book of Colossians, the Apostle Paul, one of the greatest thinkers of his time by human estimates, Paul gives you the positive answer to these secular lies. God doesn't ask you to put your intellect in the deep freeze. God does not place a premium on ignorance. On the contrary. God places a premium on

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knowledge and understanding. Believing on the Lord Jesus Christ is what liberates a person to use your mind in a way that the unbeliever can't even understand.

It is the unbeliever who is ignorant – and as Paul tells us in Romans chapter one, the unbeliever is deliberately ignorant, ignorant by choice. He refuses to retain God in his thinking. He refuses to come to the light. He refuses to give glory to God, and insists on giving glory to man. But here in Colossians is the true picture of the believer in Christ: It is God's Word, illuminated by the Holy Spirit, which liberates and equips the individual believer and the church as a body to think God's thoughts. It is God's Word that equips the Scripture-driven Christian, and the Scripture-driven church.

Armed with God's Word, and relying on God's indwelling Spirit to guide you in it, you can meet every problem and every challenge. The difference is that you do not need to attempt to take on these things in the power of the flesh. You can deal with these things in the strength of Christ. We find many examples of this in God's Word, but I just want to mention two of them by way of contrast.

Look at Peter and the other apostles whom Jesus called during His earthly ministry. In the eyes of the world, they 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

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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."

That's on the one hand, humanly speaking. On the other hand, there is the Apostle Paul himself. By human standards, Paul was a highly educated man. He went to the leading school of his day, and although Scripture doesn't give us this directly, as I read the book of Acts and read Paul's epistles, I have no doubt that Paul was the star student, that Paul was one who was marked out for brilliance and success.

But years later, after his conversion, he told the Galatian church this. He said, 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 too have been with Jesus, just like the other apostles. That was just as necessary for me as it was for them. And all of the religious intellectualism that I once counted to be the greatest gain, I now count to be a total loss. Why? Because Christ has given me genuine understanding, genuine knowledge, knowledge of the truth as it is in Christ and in Him alone.

You Need to Develop and Exercise Spiritual Intelligence

That is what we need today. God's people need to develop and exercise spiritual understanding. You need to be with Jesus – as Paul was, as the other disciples were. And the way to be with Jesus, the way to have the mind of Christ, the way to know God's will, is to be in God's Word.

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In Colossians chapters one and two, Paul tells us that all the riches of wisdom are in Christ. Everything that has been made – including wisdom itself, knowledge itself, understanding itself – all of it is in Him, all of it emanates from Him – from Jesus Christ, and from nowhere and from no one else. Seek after Him. Seek the riches of the full assurance of understanding, of all that you are and all that you have, in the preeminent Christ alone.

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