

Knowing the Lord's Will

The context of Ephesians 5:17 must be taken into account if we are to understand and apply Paul's command to "understand the will of the Lord." As we look to Ephesians 5 as a collective whole, we see that Paul tells us the essence of the Christian conversion. He says that the Christian has been transformed. It isn't as if we have simply changed clothes or that we have added something on to our existence. We have been radically transformed! We have been transformed from darkness into light because as those in Christ, we have Christ who is light, living in us! We have been made into the light bearers of Jesus. As light bearers, we are to both express the light of Christ to the darkened world and to expose the darkness of this world. Now, if we are to function as light bearers we therefore must understand the will of God.

Ephesians 5:17

17 Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.

I. Paul says don't be foolish, but fear the Lord. This is the beginning of wisdom.

In verse 17a, Paul evokes language from Old Testament wisdom literature. The word "foolish" occurs over 70 times in the book of Proverbs alone. From those many passages, we see those who are foolish are those who live according to their own "rules" and "design." Quite dramatically, Proverbs 1:20-23 shows personified Wisdom crying out in the streets, "How long, O simple ones, will you love being simple?" Wisdom cries out because she sees the problem with humanity as it loves to live outside the design of God. This brings heartache, brokenness, and dysfunction. Therefore we understand that Wisdom points to and is the design of the Lord. To be foolish then is to live contrary to the design of God.

Now, the word Paul uses for "understand" is derived from the Old Testament word for wisdom. As we see elsewhere in the Bible, the "fear of the Lord" (a reverence and love for God and His ways) is the beginning of Wisdom. Therefore, the beginning of understanding the will of God is to not be foolish, but to fear the Lord and to earnestly structure your life according to the design of God.

II. To know the will of God is to know His revealed Word.

The question is, if we are functioning from the above starting point, what then is the will of God? It is interesting to note in the first place that Paul commands us to understand the will of God. Paul cannot command us to know the unknowable future. There are aspects of the future that are knowable such as Christ's return and His bringing to completion New Creation. But Paul isn't commanding us to know what we simply cannot know. For Deuteronomy 29:29 says "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us, to our children forever, that we may do all the words of the Law." What is he saying then? Paul is commanding us to understand what is knowable: the revealed Word of God and His general will.

There are several aspects of God's general will revealed to us in the book of Ephesians alone. For example, God reveals to us His will to reconcile all things to Christ, unite all things in Christ and for Him to use His people united to Christ for His redemptive purposes. From Eph. 1:9-10 and 2:10-16, we see that God's will is His mission! We also see that God's will for us is for us to be holy. Very plainly, we see in Eph. 1:4 and 1 Thess. 4: 3 that God wants us to be made holy and presented blameless before Him. And lastly, we see from many places in Scripture (Eph. 1:16-18, Eph. 3:15-19, Col. 1:9, Rom. 12: 2) that God wants us to be theocentric people. He wants us to view life through the lenses of the Spirit, to operate and to live within the new and true reality—Christ risen and Christ reigning!

Paul doesn't say that the choices we have to make or the crossroads we come to in life are easy. But he does command us to see these crossroads and to ask life's difficult questions in light of God's revealed will. To function as the light bearers we have been transformed to be, we must understand the will of God which is right before us, the revealed Word of God. This is God's will for you—to be His light bearer and to shine bright the light of Jesus!

Discussion Questions

1. As Christians, do you see your primary function and purpose in life as being the light bearers of Christ?
2. As you seek to understand the will of God, are you first operating from the starting point of "fearing the Lord?" Are you seeking to live by your own rules and design or are you eagerly seeking to structure your life around and within God's design?
3. Are you trusting God with the "unknowable?"
4. What are ways you can begin to discipline yourself to view life through the lenses of the Spirit? (Hint: immersion in the promises, benefits and teachings of Jesus)
5. While there are many questions you can ask when making a difficult decision (Is it lawful? Is this consistent with Christ's Lordship? Does this benefit others? What does my wise council say?), are you first processing your decisions through God's revealed general will?