

This evening, we will hear the word of the Lord from Colossians 1:9, where we read, “And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding....” That is plenty for one sermon. The main topic of this verse is the knowledge of God’s will and that will be the focus of this sermon, but as this is part of what Paul is praying for, for the Colossians, we will first consider what we learn about the importance of prayer from what Paul says here.

Some background: Paul is in prison when he wrote this letter. He had never met the Colossian Christians. He had heard about their conversion from a man named Epaphras who had brought the gospel to the Colossians and had reported to Paul in prison how God had blessed the gospel in Colossae so that this little church had been formed. Paul is filled with thanksgiving for the faith, love and hope that God had worked in the Colossians. He tells the Colossians about his prayer of thanksgiving for them and then he continues in verse 9, “And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you....”

These few words are actually quite significant. Paul hears about the conversion of the Colossians. He is delighted and thankful to God for what he hears. And so, he begins to pray for them without ceasing. Paul is saying – “We heard about your conversion to Christ. We thanked God for what he has done in your lives. And so, we have added you to our prayer list and you have regularly been in our prayers.”

Now I have been referring to Paul as the author of this letter. That is because he is the main source and authority behind the letter and because it is less awkward to just say Paul instead of Paul and Timothy over and over again. Most of the time that is just fine. But in the first part of this verse it is useful to take note of the “we” in the sentence. “[W]e have not ceased to pray for you” Paul is not just praying by himself. He is, at least, praying with Timothy and perhaps with others. At the very least Paul and Timothy met regularly for prayer and probably Epaphras and others were part of those meetings for prayer.

And those prayers were for the churches. In many of his other letters, Paul mentions his prayers for the recipients of those letters. We are given a glimpse of the priority given to prayer for the churches by Paul and those who were with him. We are given a glimpse of the significant role that prayer played in the life of the early Christians. What we see here is how important prayer is in the Christian life and how important prayer is for the mission of the church. Paul and those with him were praying constantly for the churches.

Paul was in prison during this time. He was suffering. But his prayers were not self-centered. No doubt he prayed that he might be released. But his letters show that he was more passionate about the spread of the gospel and the spiritual growth of the churches. And this highlights the importance of prayer for the kingdom in the mission of the church – including corporate prayer. Paul and those with him prayed a lot for the churches because they cared a lot about the advance of the kingdom which included the growth in holiness of the members of the churches.

This is one of the things that it mentioned often in the NT when it comes to contributing to the mission of the church. The example of Paul and Timothy of their constant prayers for the churches is a call for us to be constant in our prayers for the growth and wellbeing of the church – our own certainly, but also other churches that we know about and the church of Christ as a whole.

In the light of this, I want to encourage attendance at our prayer meetings. This is one of the most important things that we do together as a church in seeking the kingdom of God. It is wonderful that we can work together by giving money which is used to fund mission work of various kinds. That is an important way that the church together fulfills the great commission. And the NT refers to that many times when it refers to the way in which the churches partnered with Paul by supporting him in his mission work. But this passage shows us how important prayer is for the mission of the church.

It is a fundamental part of the gospel message that God is the only one who can convert people and God is the only one who can give growth in holiness and spiritual maturity. It is also a fundamental part of the gospel message that God works through the prayers of his people. And so prayer is one of the most important things that we can do to fulfill our mission as people of God.

Now, the first thing that is mentioned here is that the Colossians “may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding...” It is significant how this request relates to the gospel message. Back in verse 6 Paul had mentioned that the Colossians had “heard and understood the grace of God in truth.” As a result of the preaching of the gospel and God’s blessing upon that preaching the Colossians had come to a knowledge of the grace of God. They had come to understand the grace of God in the gospel. They had heard the good news about Jesus and salvation in him, the forgiveness of sins, peace with God, membership in the family of God, new life in Christ. First, they had come to a knowledge of the grace of God.

And **now** Paul and Timothy were praying that they might be filled with the knowledge of the will of God. Knowing the will of God and growing in our knowledge of the will of God is of vital importance for the Christian life, but all that is rooted in a knowledge of the **grace** of God. Apart from the grace of God, we are still in bondage to sin. Apart from the grace of God, we are under the wrath of God. The will of God for us at that point is that we turn to him in repentance and faith in Jesus. The will of God for the unsaved is that they repent and believe the gospel. In 1 Timothy 2:4 Paul teaches that God our Saviour ... “desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”

But what happens then is the life that believers are saved to live. Salvation is about being forgiven and made right with God, but it is also about living a life that is pleasing to God. The blessings of salvation include a change in status so that we are no longer God’s enemies, but rather his beloved children, but they also include the blessedness of beginning to live life as it was designed to be lived. We are designed to flourish by living lives of obedience to God and one of the blessings of salvation is the inner renewal by the power of the Holy Spirit that gives us the desire to live a life of obedience and the power to begin living that way.

And one of the things that we need to live such a life is “knowledge of [God’s] will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding....” The Christian life is about living a life that is pleasing to God and living that kind of life begins with knowing what is pleasing to God. And that is why Paul and Timothy were praying without ceasing that the Colossians would be filled with “the knowledge of [God’s] will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding.”

So, we will spend a bit of time thinking about “the knowledge of God’s will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding.” At the heart of living a life that is pleasing to God (and a blessing for us) is knowledge of the will of God. In order to live the life that God is calling us to live, we must know what the will of God for our lives is.

One of the key fruits of salvation in the lives of believers is that they submit to God’s authority which means that God’s will is given more weight than our own will. With Jesus we learn to say, not my will but your will be done.

If God’s will is not the highest authority in your life, you are not a Christian. That does not mean that true Christians always put God’s will before their own because we still sin. But a Christian, by definition, is one who is committed to submitting his life to God’s will. That is what it means to relate to God as God and to Jesus Christ as Lord. Living the Christian life means that our goal in life is to live more consistently according to the will of God.

And Paul’s priority in his prayers for the Colossians teaches us that growing in the **knowledge** of God’s will is necessary for growing in **living** according to God’s will. Paul and Timothy were constantly praying together that the Colossians would be “filled with the knowledge of [God’s] will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord.” It is clear that what Paul has in mind is knowledge of God’s will leading to doing of God’s will.

Knowing God’s will and not doing it is a serious matter. Jesus says in Matthew 7:21 “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.” In order to do the will of the Father we must know what that will is. But if we do not do the will of the Father, we will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Knowledge of God’s will is necessary and important, but it is not enough. It must lead to doing the will of God as well.

So, Paul and Timothy are praying that the Colossians would be filled with the knowledge of God’s will. How do they expect that to happen? What will it look like if God hears their prayers and the Colossians are filled with the knowledge of God’s will? The first thing that will happen if God answers their prayers is that the Colossians will have a growing interest to know the will of God. God does not take a metaphorical funnel and pour the knowledge of his will into the minds of his people. God has created and saved us to learn things by engaging in certain activities. God has created and saved us to be engaged in the learning process. There are some kinds of

knowledge that are kind of built into us, such as a rudimentary knowledge of right and wrong, but for the most part it is God's will that we be active in the learning process and that begins with interest – a desire to learn – a desire to know. Not much learning happens without that.

So, implied in Paul and Timothy's prayer that the Colossians might be filled with the knowledge of God's will is the desire that the Colossians might be given a strong desire to know God's will for their own lives, but also God's will for the whole world. God's will is a very big subject because it encompasses the whole creation and so all of history. But not much growth in knowledge happens without interest.

The implication is that we should be interested in being filled with the knowledge of God's will. And we should pray for a growing interest for ourselves and for others. If we want to live lives that are pleasing to God, we will be interested in knowing what it is that pleases God. We see this attitude expressed in Psalm 119 where the Psalmist often speaks of his desire to know God's law or precepts or word. Psalm 119:15, "I will meditate on your precepts and fix my eyes on your ways."

Now the principle source for our knowledge of the will of God is the Bible. If we think of Paul and Timothy's prayer that the Colossians might be filled with the knowledge of God's will, it is helpful to remember that this report of this prayer comes in a letter in which Paul and Timothy are communicating the will of God to the Colossians among other things. There is a great deal in the letter to the Colossians concerning the will of God for their lives and Paul, as an apostle, is very conscious of the fact that his teaching was given by revelation from God. And so no doubt when Paul and Timothy are praying that the Colossians might be filled with the knowledge of [God's] will" they are praying that the Colossians will take the time to ponder what they had written in this letter and by extension, whatever apostolic teaching they had available to them, as well as the OT Scriptures. The Bible is the primary source for our knowledge of the will of God.

So certainly, part of what Paul and Timothy are praying for is that the Colossians will be interested in learning what God's says about his will in the Scriptures and this will involve things like learning from the appointed teachers in the church as well as from one another. If they had access to the Scriptures, it would include reading and pondering them. But in those days not everyone had their own copies of the Bible as we do. They would have been more dependent on worship services and other meetings where the word of God was taught as well as learning from one another. We have much more access to the Bible and to all manner of resources to help us grow in the knowledge of the will of God.

And this prayer of Paul and Timothy teaches us how important it is as Christians to be interested in learning more about the will of God. We are not all scholars but being interested in learning more about the will of God is part of what it means to be a Christian. That begins with taking part in worship services and thinking about what we learn, but it also involves Bible studies, family worship and personal reading and listening. The answer of this prayer in our lives is a growing interest in and pursuit of growing in the knowledge of God's will.

Now you might wonder why this is such a big deal. Is knowing God's will not a fairly simple matter? We have the Ten Commandments. We know that we are to love God and our neighbor. Can't we learn the will of God in about ½ hour and get on with our lives?

The truth is that being filled with the knowledge of God's will is not such a simple matter. It is like the gospel in general – at one level it is very simple, but a lifetime is not long enough to master its depths. At one level there is a simplicity about knowing the will of God. The main lines can be summarized and understood very quickly. But as we progress, we find that it is a huge subject and there is always more to know and learn and apply to our lives.

You see, doing the will of God involves all of life. Paul in this passage, speaks of being filled with the knowledge of God's will "so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him; bearing fruit in every good work...." Paul is talking about living all of life to the glory of God. That begins with the obvious things: worship God, love one another, do not kill, do not commit adultery, do not steal. But the will of God concerns much more than these obvious things.

Think of the Lord's Prayer. We are to pray, "Your Kingdom come; your will be done on earth as it is in heaven." We are to pray that God's will will be done on earth as it is in heaven. That is very very big because it is referring to God's will for the whole of creation – for the whole world. The knowledge of God's will then involves learning about what God will is for the whole creation. How does God want human beings to live together? What is God's will for justice? What is God's will for the economy? What is God's will for politics? What is God's will for how we deal with the creation – so for the environment? These are all very big questions. And I am not suggesting that we can figure out all of these questions on our own. Progress in answering these kinds of questions happens through the whole church contributing to the discussion. There is a role here for Christian higher education and Christian scholarship because in some areas knowing the will of God is rather complicated. There is a role here for Christians working in every area of our shared life together on this earth and contributing to answering the big questions about the will of God.

And our convictions concerning the big questions influences what it means to "walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him." The will of God involves how we vote and how we contribute to the Christian witness concerning political issues and all of the other areas that I mentioned. The will of God for the care of the creation will affect our own decisions when it comes to things like waste and how our habits of consumption contribute to harming the environment. The will of God for justice will affect our decisions about some of our spending decisions because sometimes the cheap price that we pay for something involves injustices to those involved in producing that something.

Of course, the whole thing is much too big for us to know everything. We can't know everything about all that goes on in the world, but my point is this that God's will includes everything on earth and being filled with the

knowledge of God's will includes giving some attention to the bigger questions of what it means for us to please God in our involvement in our the life of our society.

We will now consider what Paul means by the phrase "spiritual wisdom and understanding" in connection with being filled with the knowledge of the will of God. The adjective "spiritual" here is one of those places that refers to the Holy Spirit that is easy to miss. Most times in the NT when the adjective "spiritual" is used, the idea is not spiritual as opposed to physical, but relating to the Holy Spirit. And so what Paul and Timothy are praying for is the wisdom and understanding that the Holy Spirit gives.

Wisdom and understanding in this context are similar in meaning. They have to do with insight and perception in discerning the will of God in specific situations. In many cases the will of God is obvious, but in many cases it is not. Often it takes wisdom to apply the general principles of God's will to the specific decisions that must be made. This idea is expressed more fully in Romans 12:2 where Paul writes, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect."

Discernment is a good word in this context. The will of God is not given to us in exhaustive detail. In many cases we have principles that must be applied to specific situations. Take for instance the command to love. It takes wisdom and understanding and discernment to know how love should be expressed in specific situations. Sometimes parents express their love for a child by giving them a good spanking. And there are many, many areas like this.

It is possible to know the will of God in a certain area and be unwise in applying it in the complexity of real life. This is often the case in applying the will of God in our relationship with other people.

Paul writes in Ephesians 5:15 "Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. Therefore, do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is."

Wisdom and discernment are important for knowing the will of God in the concrete activities and words and decisions of life. Wisdom is an important and fascinating subject in the Bible. It is rooted in the fact that God made us in his image so that pleasing him involves much more than woodenly following exhaustive regulations for every situation in life. The knowledge of God's will is not like that in most areas. God is looking for us to take what he has revealed to us about his will and apply that knowledge to our lives with discernment and wisdom. The book of Proverbs gives us many examples of nuggets of wisdom.

So we have for instance Proverbs 10:17 which says, "Whoever heeds instruction is on the path to life, but he who rejects reproof leads others astray." Or 11:12 "Whoever belittles his neighbor lacks sense, but a man of understanding remains silent."

Wisdom is a beautiful thing and it is what Paul is praying for the Colossians. “And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding.” We need knowledge of the will of God, but we also need wisdom to apply that knowledge in the most fruitful and God-honoring ways. And that kind of wisdom is necessary to “walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him; bearing fruit in every good work.”

Now from this context, the most obvious way to be filled with the knowledge of God’s will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding is to pray for it. And Paul’s example here teaches us that this is something that we need to pray for, for the whole church. Ultimately wisdom comes from God. Here Paul prays for “spiritual wisdom and understanding” - that is wisdom and understanding that comes from the Spirit. Later on, in this epistle Paul will teach that “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” are hidden in Christ. (2:3)

For practical purposes at this moment that means that we learn true wisdom through learning from Christ and depending upon Christ. We get it from reading and thinking about the word of God. We get it by asking for it. But we also get it by thoughtfulness – by asking for advice – by spending time with and observing wise people – by learning from our mistakes – by reading – by life experience. It is a gift that we should pray for – for ourselves and others – but it is also something that we are called to seek and to cultivate.

I have mentioned a few times that God does not give us exhaustive knowledge of his will that a robot would be able to follow. That is not God’s will for us. His will is that we live to please him by using the capacities that he has given us and developing them so that we live skillful and fruitful lives to his glory. None of this happens apart from his grace and power, but we are very much involved and that is what makes life so rich and fulfilling. God’s will for us is fullness of life for his glory and our joy. The life that he is calling us to live is a beautiful thing.