

THE SOVEREIGN GOD AND THE MYSTERY OF HIS WILL: A STUDY OF EPHESIANS

(LESSON EIGHTY-NINE)

“UNDERSTANDING THE WILL OF THE LORD”

EPHESIANS 5:15-19

15 See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise,

16 Redeeming the time, because the days are evil.

17 Wherefore be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is.

18 And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit;

19 Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord.

In verse **15** Paul writes, “*See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise.*”

The word “walk” is a translation of the Greek word **peripateó**: (**per-ee-pat-eh’-o**), which literally means, “to walk around.” Later, **peripateó** came to mean, “to make one’s way, to make progress, to make use of one’s opportunities.” Finally, the word came to mean, “to regulate one’s life, to conduct one’s self.” Paul’s use of the word here reflects this latter meaning.

The word “*circumspectly*” is a translation of the Greek word **akribos**: (**ak-ree-boce**). The idea associated with the word is that of looking, examining, and investigating something with great care and alertness.

Our English word “**circumspect**” is derived from a Latin word which conveys the **literal** picture of looking around, and **figuratively**, the idea of being cautious. One who is walking “*circumspectly*” therefore, is one who is “looking around as he or she walks,” carefully considering all the circumstances and possible consequences **before** making a decision.

Paul says that we are to walk “*not as fools, but as wise.*” The Greek word translated “*fools*” is **asophos**: (**as’-of-os**), which means, “without wisdom, silly, foolish.” The word describes one who lacks the power of proper discernment.

The word “*wise*” is the translation of the Greek word **sophos**: (**sof-os**), which describes the ability to use knowledge for correct behaviour. **Sophos** is the practical application of acquired knowledge. In the realm of moral living, “wisdom” refers to skill in living. The “*wise*” person lives with moral skill so that something of lasting value is produced from his or her life.

In verse **16**, Paul informs the believers as to how they are to walk wisely and not foolishly. He writes, “*Redeeming the time, because the days are evil.*” The Greek word translated “*Redeeming*” is **exagorazó**: (**ex-ag-or-ad’zo**), which means, “to redeem by payment of a price, to recover from the power of another, to ransom, to buy off.” Paul uses the word here to refer to making a wise use of every opportunity for doing well.

The Greek word translated “*time*” is not **chronos**: (**khron’-os**), which refers to chronological or sequential time, but **kairos**: (**kahee-ros**), which refers to time as regarded in its strategic, epoch-making, opportune seasons. It refers to a moment or period of time as being especially appropriate for a certain action.

The idea of **kairos** is not clock time but what one writer calls “kingdom opportunities,” those openings for ministry that often come at inconvenient times. Paul is encouraging believers to keep their lives uncluttered so that they can respond when the need arises—because kingdom opportunities can get squeezed out of an overly tight schedule.

There is a sense in which **kairos** alludes to the brevity of life, which begs us to pause and reflect on the fact that life is like the grass of the field, here today, gone tomorrow. In light of this truth we should take a sincere, sobering inventory of our daily activities of thought, word and deed! As Moses wrote in **Psalm 90:12**, “*So teach us to number our days, that we may apply our hearts unto wisdom*” (**King James Version**).

Paul is urging the believers in Ephesus to seize and use every opportunity to “*walk as children of light,*” “*because the days are evil.*” The Greek word translated “*evil*” is **ponéros**: (**pon-ay-ros**’), which refers to “active evil” or evil in active opposition to good. The fact that there is active evil opposing that which is good, lends a sense of urgency to redeem the time. And the fact that there is active evil opposing good, means we must not try to accomplish this redemption of time by depending on our good intentions but by seeking enlightenment from God’s Word, and power from His Spirit!

William Law wrote the following sobering words: “Where did we come up with this concept of ‘spare time,’ anyway? Is there any time for which we aren’t accountable to God? Is there any time during which God doesn’t care what you are doing? No Christian has ever had spare time. You may have spare time from labor or necessity, you may stop working and refresh yourself, but no Christian ever had time off from living like a Christian.”

Based on his exhortation for believers to walk with wisdom (verse **15**), and to make the most of every opportunity to glorify God (verse **16**), Paul warns believers in verse **17** to guard against recklessness or folly in

lifestyle choices. He writes, “*Wherefore be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is.*”

Paul first tells them to stop being foolish or demonstrating a lack of good judgment. Then he encourages them to discern the will of God. This clearly indicates that the will of God is not something mysterious but something which may be discerned or understood.

The **New English Translation** renders the verse as follows: “*For this reason do not be foolish, but be wise by understanding what the Lord’s will is.*”

The word “*be*” is a translation of the Greek word **ginomai** (**ghin’-om-ahēe**), which means, “to become.” The word is in a construction in the Greek which forbids the continuance of an action already in progress. Paul is saying in effect to the believers in Ephesus, “Stop acting as if you don’t have the ability to understand the circumstances that occur in your life and how you should respond to them, because you do have that ability in Christ. You are able to discern how God desires for you to respond!”

The Greek word translated “*unwise*” or “*foolish*” is **aphrón**: (**af’-rone**), which means, “senseless, foolish, stupid; without reflection or intelligence, acting rashly.” The word refers to a person who does not use his or her rational powers wisely. The **aphrón** individual is one who lacks moderation because he or she fails to grasp cause-and-effect relationships. He or she is willingly ignorant of the inevitable consequences of carelessness, indiscipline and immorality. He or she is short-sighted because he or she lacks proper **spiritual** perspective and is therefore unable to act prudently.

(I use the word perspective here to speak of the interrelation in which a subject or its parts are mentally viewed, or the capacity to view things in their true relations or relative importance. As it relates to this verse, perspective refers to the ability to understand what is important and what is not in a spiritual, God-honouring sense.)

The Apostle Peter speaks of this lack of proper spiritual perspective in **2 Peter 1:5-9**. The **New English Translation** renders the passage as follows:

5 For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith excellence, to excellence, knowledge;

6 to knowledge, self-control; to self-control, perseverance; to perseverance, godliness;

7 to godliness, brotherly affection; to brotherly affection, unselfish love.

8 For if these things are really yours and are continually increasing, they will keep you from becoming ineffective and unproductive in your pursuit of knowing our Lord Jesus Christ more intimately.

9 But concerning the one who lacks such things—he is blind. That is to say, he is nearsighted, since he has forgotten about the cleansing of his past sins.

The word “*blind*” in verse **9** is a translation of the Greek word **tuphlos**: (**toof-los**’), which literally refers to physical blindness. Figuratively, **tuphlos** refers to spiritual blindness, or the inability to discern spiritual truth.

The unsaved person is in the dark because Satan has blinded his or her mind according to **2 Corinthians 4:3-4**. Our Lord taught that unless a person is regenerated or born from above, he or she cannot see or perceive the kingdom of God (**John 3:3**). The “spiritual” eyes of the believer were opened when he or she was converted. But after our spiritual eyes have been opened, it is critically important for us to eat the proper diet—the diet of the Word of God, disciplining ourselves in order to cultivate the virtues mentioned in **2 Peter 1:5-7**. In this way we increase our spiritual vision as we increasingly develop a God-honouring perspective, viewing every situation in the light of eternity and the

sovereignty of God. An Improper diet can affect visual perception not only in the physical realm but also in the spiritual realm.

The Greek word translated “*nearsighted*” is **muópazó: (moo-ope-ad’-zo)** from which our English word myopia is derived. Myopia is a condition of the eye in which parallel rays are focused in front of the retina. Nearsighted people focus right in front of them, but the further out they look, the worse their vision becomes. Distant things are not in focus. Figuratively **muópazó** refers to one who lacks foresight or discernment and thus holds a narrow view of something.

A professing Christian who is not working out his or her salvation with the diligence outlined in **2 Peter 1:5-7**, has “spiritual myopia” and is unable to discern his or her true spiritual condition. Such a person will likely have a lack of assurance of salvation. He or she invariably focuses on the world and the things of the world. He or she is taken with the fads and fashions of the age. By the time he or she decides to concentrate on eternity, it is so out of focus he or she can no longer perceive it. This person lacks the ability to see beyond the temporal to the eternal in everyday life situations and therefore lives in doubt, fear and worldly lusts as a useless, unfruitful believer. There is hardly any difference between such a believer and an unsaved individual.

Commenting on 2 Peter 1:9, John Piper made the following remarks: “The problem with the person who does not strive toward all the fruit of faith is that he is blind in two directions. When he looks to the future it’s all a haze and the promises of God are swallowed up in a blur of worldly longings. I think that is what it means by shortsighted. And when he looks to the past the forgiveness that made him so excited at first is well-nigh forgotten.”

Peter says that the spiritually myopic individual “*has forgotten about the cleansing of his past sins.*” Brothers and sisters, when we fail to “*add*” to our faith the virtues Peter mentions in **1 Peter 1:5-7**, not only will we develop spiritual myopia, but we will develop spiritual amnesia! The

person suffering from spiritual amnesia is unable to discern his or her spiritual condition, and he or she has very little or no assurance of salvation. He or she is plagued by doubts and fears concerning the genuineness of their conversion “experience.” Such an individual may in fact be genuinely saved but the joy of sins forgiven, the “soul refreshing view of Jesus, and His Word,” the finding of the Lord Jesus to be “sweeter than all”- these and other spiritual blessings are now only a dim memory. Christianity has become something to be endured not enjoyed!

Kenneth Wuest says, “This is the case of a saint who has wandered far from the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. He is carrying around with him his justification, but not availing himself of his sanctification. He is not stone blind. He has some spiritual sight. But the light of the Word dazzles his sin-sick soul as he turns his dimmed, spiritual eyes away, a sad situation in which to be.”

The word “*unwise*” or “*foolish*” in **Ephesians 5:17** describes one who does not know the will of the Lord. It is only when we understand what pleases God that we can live a life that is pleasing to Him. A person who understands what pleases God and yet fails to live a life that is pleasing to God, is a fool! In **Ephesians 5:15** Paul describes the unwise as those who simply lack wisdom, but in verse **17**, he speaks of persons who behave contrary to what they know to be right.

Instead of being “*unwise*” or “*foolish*,” Paul urges believers to “*understand what the will of the Lord is.*” Brothers and sisters, do we understand what the will of the Lord is?

The word “*understanding*” is a translation of the Greek word **suniémi**: (**soon-ee'-ay-mee**), which literally means “to set or bring together.” The idea is conveyed in the phrase, “Putting together the pieces of the puzzle.” The word describes the ability to understand concepts and to see the relationships between them. It refers to the exercise of the faculty of comprehension, intelligence, insight, and prudence.

The Greek word translated “will” is **theléma**: (**thel’-ay-mah**), which means, “what one wishes or has determined shall be done.” It refers to a desire which proceeds from one’s heart or emotions. This term expresses the result of one’s purpose or desire. Paul uses the word here to speak of God’s will, not so much as a demand but as a desire.

Understanding “*what the will of the Lord is,*” is virtually identical to Paul’s earlier charge for believers to prove “*what is acceptable unto the Lord*” (**verse 10**).

Brothers and sisters, we understand what the will of the Lord is by thinking on how the principles of Scripture apply to our experiences. This is to function as a “wise” person. We need to see things as God sees them. We find the general will of God in the Word of God and we find the specific will of God through the application of the principles found in the Word. We should not seek God’s specific will for our lives through the medium of dreams, visions, or coincidence. We should seek God’s specific will for our lives through the correct use of our understanding of His revealed will found in His Word!

Warren Wiersbe made the following remarks with respect to the correct use of our understanding: “God has given us a mind (**verse 17 a**). ‘*Understanding*’ suggests using our minds to discover and do the will of God. Too many Christians have the idea that discovering God’s will is a mystical experience that rules out clear thinking. But this idea is wrong and dangerous. We discover the will of God as He transforms the mind (**Romans 12:1-2**); and this transformation is the result of the Word of God, prayer, meditation, and worship. If God gave you a mind, then He expects you to use it. This means that learning His will involves gathering facts, examining them, weighing them, and praying for His wisdom (**James 1:5**). God does not want us simply to know His will; He wants us to understand His will.”

In **Romans 12:1-2** Paul writes,

1 Therefore I exhort you, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a sacrifice—alive, holy, and pleasing to God—which is your reasonable service.

2 Do not be conformed to this present world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may test and approve what is the will of God—what is good and well-pleasing and perfect.

(New English Translation)

In Chapter **12**, we come to a new and very important section of the epistle of Paul to the **Romans**. At the end of chapter **11**, Paul concludes his presentation of the doctrines of grace, and, beginning with chapter **12**, he urges the believers in Rome, to live their lives in conformity with the exalted position in which they have been placed as a result of God’s grace. Brothers and sisters, it is very important for us to understand that if the truth we have been taught is not practically applied, it is practically worthless.

Paul was aware that it was not possible for him to compel anyone to live a life that is pleasing to God. He understood that if a believer cannot be motivated to live a life that is pleasing to God by an appreciation for all that God has done for him or her, and in gratitude for all that God has done for him or her, there is nothing else that can motivate him or her to do so. The basis of Paul’s plea for the believers to present their bodies as living sacrifices unto God, is their appreciation of, and their gratitude for “*the mercies of God.*”

There is no set of rules or regulations, no code of conduct, no organizational standards, no external force whatsoever, not even the threat of hell, which can inspire any person to genuinely love God and serve Him. These man-made control mechanisms may ensure external compliance with the “commandments of men” but they are utterly incapable of producing true inner holiness and encouraging sincere compliance with the will of God.

In verse 2 Paul writes, “*Do not be conformed to this present world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.*” In order to understand the import of Paul’s instruction, we need to pay special attention to the words “*conformed*” and “*transformed.*”

The word “*Conformed*” is the translation of the Greek word **suschematizo** (**soos-khay-mat-id’-zo**), which refers to the act of a person assuming an outward expression **that does not come from within the person, nor is it representative of his or her inner heart life.** The word emphasizes that which is external.

The word, as it is used in **Romans 12:2** is in a construction in the Greek which forbids the continuance of an action already going on. Paul is pleading with the saints living in Rome to stop assuming an outward expression which is patterned after this world, an expression which does not come from what they truly are in their inner being as born-again children of God. He advises them that such an outward expression is not representative of what they truly are. Paul is saying in effect, “Do not allow the world to fashion you.”

The word “*world*” in this verse is the translation of the Greek word **aion** (**ahee-ohn**’), which may be described as all the thoughts, opinions, precepts, speculations, hopes, impulses, aims, aspirations, which are current in the world, and which help to create the moral atmosphere which we constantly breathe in and inevitably breathe out. It is the spirit that informs the **kosmos** or the system of the world. We must remember that every system is informed by a spirit. It is the **aion** that gave rise to the **kosmos**.

It is important for us to understand that not conforming to this world is not primarily a reference to that which is external. We know by personal experience that it is possible for us to be in conformity with an external code of dress and conduct and still not be internally transformed. I am certainly not saying that the externals are unimportant, but our primary

concern and focus must be the internal transformation of our inner heart-lives.

The saints who have presented their bodies to God as living sacrifices will not allow themselves to be conformed to the world. This is because their lives are not moulded from the outside but from the inside. Their change is not merely an external one but an internal one. The change that has taken place in their lives is moral and spiritual in character. Therefore, they have an inward power to overcome the pressures that the **aion**, or the spirit of the age exerts on them, and that inward power is unleashed when their bodies are presented as living sacrifices to God. Such persons are not moulded by the world's thoughts, opinions, hopes, aspirations or morals. In other words, the world does not set the standard for them; it is they who set the standard for the world.

Instead of being conformed to this world, Paul begs the saints to be "*transformed*." The word is the translation of the Greek word **metamorphoo** which refers to the act of giving outward expression of one's inner character. **The outward expression comes from the inner character and is a true representation of that inner character.**

Paul says in effect to the saints, "Change your outward expression from that which you had before salvation, an expression which came from your totally depraved nature and was representative of it, to an expression which comes from your regenerated inner being and is representative of it."

When we change our outward expression from that which was true of us before we were saved and give expression to what we are in our inner regenerated beings, we will be transformed saints.

"But how are we to do this?" you will ask. Paul informs us that we are to do this by the renewing of our minds. "*Be transformed by the renewing of your mind.*" says Paul. This is the call to the "intense Christian life."

In **Ephesians 4:23** Paul uses a striking phrase. He says, “*Be renewed in the spirit of your mind.*” The mind has a “spirit.” In other words, our minds have what we call a “mindset.” Our minds do not merely have the power to perceive and detect; they also have a viewpoint, an attitude, a predisposition, a bias. Someone has observed that “The problem with our minds is not merely that we are finite, but that we are fallen.” Our “natural” minds are hostile to the absolute supremacy of God. Our minds are not **by nature** desirous of worshipping God. They are by nature desirous of worshipping self. That is the natural “spirit” of our minds. That is why we have such a Titanic struggle as we endeavour to live for God. And it is precisely because of this that Paul writes, “*Be renewed in the spirit of your mind.*”

When Paul refers to the renewing of the mind, he is speaking of the gradual conforming of the believer more and more to the new spiritual world into which he or she has been introduced, and in which he or she now lives and operates. He is speaking of the gradual restoration of the divine image in a believer. The transformation is dependent on the complete change of the believer’s mental process. This is accomplished through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. When the Christian definitely, and intelligently, and consistently yields to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit will put sin out of his or her life and produce His own fruit, “*love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, Meekness, temperance.*” The Holy Spirit does that by controlling the mental processes of the believer.

Transformation is not about switching from the works of the flesh to the works of the Law. Paul does say that believers should replace the works of the flesh with the works of the Law. No, no, no! That is legalism. Instead, the works of the flesh must be replaced with the fruit of the Spirit. The Christian alternative to an immoral lifestyle is not to replace that lifestyle with a list of rules, regulations and standards. The alternative to an immoral lifestyle is the transforming power of the Holy Spirit working effectually in the lives of believers who are allowing

themselves to be led of the Spirit. Paul speaks of this in **Philippians 2:12-13**. The **Message** translates the verses as follows:

12 What I'm getting at, friends, is that you should simply keep on doing what you've done from the beginning. When I was living among you, you lived in responsive obedience. Now that I'm separated from you, keep it up. Better yet, redouble your efforts. Be energetic in your life of salvation, reverent and sensitive before God.

13 That energy is God's energy, an energy deep within you, God himself willing and working at what will give him the most pleasure.

Transformation is about a profound, Holy Spirit-worked change from the inside out. But this can only occur in the lives of those who have presented their bodies as living sacrifices to God.

You know you are transformed when what you **love** to do is what you **ought** to do. When you are transformed you understand that true freedom is **enjoying** your walk with Jesus Christ, not merely **enduring** it.

The world wants to **control** your mind, but God wants to **transform** your mind. The world wants to change your mind, so it exerts **pressure** from without. But the Holy Spirit changes your mind by releasing **power** from within. If the world controls your thinking, you are a **conformer**, if God controls your thinking, you are a **transformer**.

When the mental processes of the saint have been renovated, when his or her mind has been renewed, the result will be that he or she will be able to “*test and approve what is the will of God—what is good and well-pleasing and perfect.*” The word “*test*” is the translation of a Greek word which means “to put to the test for the purpose of approving, and finding that the thing tested meets the specifications laid down, to put one’s approval upon it.” As a result of the Holy Spirit’s control of our mental processes we are enabled to put our lives to the test for the

purpose of approving them. The specification is that our lives must conform to the Word of God. When we consistently obey the Word of God and discover what it feels like to have the Word saturate and control our lives, we will recognize how transformative, how life changing the Word of God really is and we will put our approval upon it. It is this very thing that we read of in **John 7:16-17**:

16 So Jesus replied, "My teaching is not from me, but from the one who sent me.

17 If anyone wants to do God's will, he will know about my teaching, whether it is from God or whether I speak from my own authority.

(New English Translation)

The mind that is renewed is best suited to appreciate and understand the will of God. Every Christian is responsible to discover what God's will is for his or her life. When we are made aware of some aspect of the revealed will of God, through prayer, our personal Bible study, or the preaching or teaching of God's Word, we must embrace it and apply it even though it may not be easy for us to do so. The more we embrace and apply the Word of God to our lives, the more acceptable His will becomes to us. No plan or program of ours can improve upon the plan of God. We can only perceive bits and pieces; God sees the whole. The more we yield to the Spirit of God and His Word, the more we appreciate that His will for us is perfect.

We will bring this Lesson to a close with the following helpful comments, by **Ray Stedman**, on what the will of God is:

"Do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.' That is, be aware of what God wants out of every situation. Now, almost always, when one uses the phrase, 'the will of the Lord,' most people, including most Christians, understand it in terms of guidance. They think you are referring to what you ought to do next, where you ought to live, what

job you ought to have, whom you ought to marry, or how you can decide a problem that is before you. But guidance is not the major problem, or the major factor, in understanding the will of the Lord. God is not half so much interested in what you **do** as what you **are**. Therefore, the will of the Lord does not concern itself primarily about what you do. That is a rather simple matter. Once you get the real issue straightened out, what you do is relatively unimportant and can be handled very easily. What you are-that is the big thing, what you are in every situation. This is what the apostle is talking about."