

# Spiritual Knowledge

by J.C. Ryle

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*Honest obedience to God's will is a way to obtain clear spiritual knowledge, and God tests men's sincerity by making obedience part of the process of obtaining religious knowledge.*

**Scripture:** John 7:17

**Topics:** "Obedience to God", "Spiritual Knowledge"

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## Description

J.C. Ryle emphasizes that honest obedience to God's will is essential for gaining clear spiritual knowledge, as Jesus teaches that those willing to do God's will will understand His doctrine. He warns against waiting for intellectual clarity before committing to faith, asserting that knowledge is acquired through humble obedience. Ryle also highlights the danger of forming hasty judgments based on appearances, using the example of the Jews who condemned Jesus for healing on the Sabbath while practicing circumcision on the same day. He encourages believers to live up to the light they have, as neglecting this leads to spiritual darkness. Ultimately, Ryle calls for discernment in judgment, reminding us that true understanding often lies beneath the surface.

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## Transcript

"If anyone wills to do His will, he shall know concerning the doctrine, whether it is from God or whether I speak on My own authority . . . I did one work, and you all marvel. Moses therefore gave you circumcision (not that it is from Moses, but from the fathers), and you circumcise a man on the Sabbath. If a man receives circumcision on the Sabbath, so that the law of Moses should not be broken, are you angry with Me because I made a man completely well on the Sabbath? Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment." (John 7:17-24)

We learn, first, in this passage, that honest obedience to God's will is one way to obtain clear spiritual knowledge. Our Lord says, "If any man will do His will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself." The English language fails to give the full force of the Greek. It is literally, "If any man is willing to do--has a mind and desire and inclination to do--God's will." The principle laid down is one of immense importance. Clear knowledge depends greatly on honest obedience, and the distinct views of Divine truth cannot be expected unless we try to practice such things as we know. Living up to our light, we shall have more light. Striving to do the few things we know, we shall find the eyes of our understanding enlightened and shall know more.

Those greatly err who profess to be waiting until their mental difficulties are removed before they become decided Christians. They must change their plan. They must understand that knowledge comes through humble obedience as well as through the intellect. Let them begin by honestly doing God's will, as far as they know that will, and in so doing they will find their minds enlightened.

We learn, furthermore, that God tests men's sincerity by making obedience part of the process by which religious knowledge is obtained. Are we really willing to do God's will so far as we know it? If we are, God will take care that our knowledge is increased. Bishop Hall paraphrases the text as follows: "If any man shall, with a simple and honest heart, yield himself over to do the will of my Father, according to the measure of what he knows, God shall encourage and bless that man with further light."

We learn also the great principle on which many will be condemned at the last day: they did not live up to their light. They did not use such knowledge as they possessed, and so were left in darkness and dead in sins. There is probably not one in a thousand among unconverted people who does not know far better than he practices. Such men surely, if lost, will have no one to blame but themselves!

From this passage we learn the danger of forming a hasty judgment. The Jews at Jerusalem were ready to condemn our Lord as a sinner against the law of Moses, because He had done a miracle of healing on the Sabbath day (the miracle at the pool of Bethesda). Our Lord argues as follows: "Even among yourselves you circumcise a child on the Sabbath day when it happens to be the eighth day after his birth, in order that the law of circumcision (which your great lawgiver, Moses, sanctioned and reordained) should not be broken. You thus admit the entire principle that there is some work which may be done on the Sabbath day. Is it then just and fair to be angry with Me, because I have done a far greater work to a man on the Sabbath than that of circumcision? I have not wounded his body by circumcision, but made him perfectly whole. It was an act of necessity and mercy, and therefore an act as lawful to be done as circumcision. In appearance, the Sabbath was broken. In reality, it was not broken at all. Do not hastily condemn an action, such as this, without looking below the surface."

The principle here laid down is one of vast importance. Nothing is so common as to judge--either too favorably or too unfavorably--people and their actions merely by looking at the outward appearance. We are apt to form hasty opinions of others, either for good or evil, on very insufficient grounds. We pronounce some men to be good and others to be bad, some to be godly and others to be ungodly, without anything but appearance to aid our decision. We should do well to remember our blindness, and to keep in mind this text. The bad are not always so bad, nor the good always so good, as they appear. A potsherd may be covered over with gilding and look valuable. A nugget of gold may be covered with dirt and look like worthless rubbish. One man's work may look good at first, yet by-and-by, turn out to have been done from the basest motives. Another man's work may look very questionable at first, and yet at last may prove Christ-like and truly godly.

May the Lord deliver us from rashly judging by appearances!

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