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Col 1:9-14

4th Message

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LORD, TEACH US YOUR WAYS

SERIES: THE CHRIST-FORMED CHURCH

There are indeed pictures that do the work of a thousand words, and the picture you see on the screen is one of them: a young boy and his dog kneeling side by side, eyes screwed shut, hands and paws perched in prayer at the side of a bed. Certainly the idea of asking God to teach us his ways is a matter of prayer and hopefully, we would have the same sincerity, receptivity and vulnerability that we see in this boy and his dog. This is where we come to in our study today in the book of Colossians, picking up Paul's prayer for the Colossian church in verses 9-14.

For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives, so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, and giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his people in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (Col. 9-14 TNIV)

The thanksgiving that Paul expresses in the opening verses of chapter one (Col 1:3-8), which we have studied over the past two weeks, now moves into intercession, as Paul prays constantly and tirelessly for the Colossians. This prayer is not unlike the prayers we find in Ephesians and Philippians, even though Paul never visited Colossae.

There are several word repetitions that link together Paul's attitude of thanksgiving for the Colossian believers and the intercession he makes in prayer on their behalf -

- "since the day" (6, 9)
- "we heard" (4, 9)
- "knowledge" (6, 9, 10)
- "bearing fruit and increasing" (6, 10)
- "giving thanks" (3, 12)
- "the Father" (3, 12)
- "the saints" (4, 12)
- "in spirit" and "spiritual" (8, 9)
- "the inheritance ... in light" (12), and
- "object of hope" (5)
- "all" (4, 6, 9, 10, 11).

For Paul, thanksgiving and intercession are inseparable; they go hand in hand.

Before we delve into the particulars I want you to see the flow of the structure. Paul makes a request on behalf of the Colossians, that they might be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives. The purpose for the

request is so that the Colossians can walk in such a way so as to please God. The manifestations of a pleasing and worthy walk are four-fold: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God, being strengthened with all power, and giving joyful thanks to the Father. We can be both thankful with joy and live transformed lives because of the titanic shift that has taken place through the work of God in Jesus Christ.

The Request – Filled with Knowledge of God's Will

For this reason, since the day we heard about you, we have not stopped praying for you. We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives. (Col 1:9)

The New American Standard Bible translation is a bit different and draws attention to the fact that wisdom and understanding are spiritual in nature.

For this reason also, since the day we heard *of it*, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding (NASB95)

Praying and asking are synonymous in this context. The request, "to be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding" is a loaded phrase, typical of Paul who incorporates a great deal of Old Testament language. It basically means to have "an understanding of what is spiritually important;" to have a complete grasp of God's ways and a willingness to follow.

The verb "to be filled" is passive and speaks of God doing the filling. The idea of fullness appears several times in Paul's letter to the Colossians. The Colossians were encountering false teachers offering a fullness of truth and wisdom that was not from God.

"God's will" speaks of God's ways – his plan of salvation; the mystery of Christ; the summing up of all things in Christ; the truth of the gospel for Jews and Gentiles alike; and the sanctification of believers. Knowledge of God's will is in contrast to the false knowledge of the heretical teachers who claimed to have knowledge. The Greek word for "knowledge" is *gnosis*, and some think that the heretical teaching was a pre-Gnostic teaching. (The term Gnosticism is derived from the Greek word for knowledge.) "God's will" might also be a contrast to our will, our way of thinking.

The word "all" governs both wisdom and understanding (it occurs 5 times in verses 3-14) and speaks of a comprehensive understanding. The word "spiritual" also governs both wisdom and understanding, and implies that this is something the Holy Spirit has to impart. This is the way that the TNIV translates the text.

Knowledge, wisdom, and understanding are all words we encounter in the Old Testament. Knowledge of God always goes beyond mere head knowledge to relational knowing of God. Here are a couple familiar examples:

“The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge,” (Proverbs 1:7)

Let us acknowledge the lord;
let us press on to acknowledge him.
I desire mercy, not sacrifice,
and acknowledgment of God rather than burnt offerings.
(Hos. 6.3, 6)

Two notable examples of wisdom and understanding have to do with Joshua and Isaiah’s suffering servant.

“Now Joshua son of Nun was filled with the spirit of wisdom because Moses had laid his hands on him. So the Israelites listened to him and did what the LORD had commanded Moses.” (Deuteronomy 34:9)

The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and of might,
the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the lord—(Is. 11.2)

Luke tells us that Isaiah’s prophetic word came true, for when Jesus grew up as a boy, he increased in wisdom (Luke 2.52). Knowledge of God, wisdom, and understanding were characteristics of Jesus and other godly men and women. Now they are to characterize us as God’s people.

Paul’s request is that the Colossian’s would know God and grasp everything that is spiritually important. What is important to God becomes important to us. This request is foundational to our spiritual lives and living out our life in Christ. If we don’t fully understand and know God then we will not live well. Our broken world has distorted our image of God. We need true knowledge of God in order to have the right picture of God in our minds. God is not an idea or a spiritual principle but rather a person, a person who wants us to be with him. We need spiritual wisdom to discern truth from error and acquire the necessary guidance for our daily life. We need spiritual understanding of forgiveness, acceptance, and love to unlock the hidden places in our hearts and set us free from bondage. We need to know God is such a way that we are confident of his goodness even in the midst of struggles and trials. We need to have a grasp of God’s grace and compassion so that we see others through his eyes.

The request to be filled also implies we must receive from God, take what he wants to give us into our hearts, and be formed on the inside. Before we can “do,” we have to receive what only God can give us. It means that we don’t try harder, but immerse ourselves in God and his word. This requires opening up our hearts and being teachable, admitting to God and to ourselves that we are broken, emptying ourselves of our egos so that there is room for God to fill us, turning away from the idols, the broken cisterns from which we have tried to fill ourselves. Receiving means creating space to hear from God, a place to encounter God, and the courage to surrender to God.

“Christian spiritual formation requires that we actively and continually receive from God. We need to be extraordinary consumers of his grace, we need to receive his words of love and correction, his forgiveness, his affirmation, his life, and the list goes on. Without receiving from God, there is no true formation.”²

And so we pray with Paul, “Lord, fill us with everything we need to know about you.”

The Purpose—A Worthy and Pleasing Walk

The purpose for Paul’s petition is that the Colossians “... may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way.” (Col 1:10) The New American Standard Bible translates this “so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please *Him* in all respects” (Colossians 1:10 NAS95). This metaphor of “walking” is Paul’s favorite way of describing how we behave in the world. Our walk is to be worthy, meaning that it is appropriate or fitting to who we are in Christ as God’s people. We walk in a way that is pleasing to God in every way, in all respects, not just in some respects. Pleasing signifies behavior by which one seeks to gain favor. We behave in ways that please God and not ourselves. Pleasing doesn’t mean perfectionism, but holiness and wholeness, living the way God intends us to live. This is in contrast to the false teachers who promoted rigorous asceticism as a grand show of humility.

Most of us are well acquainted with pleasing people. The reasons why we try to please people are usually very unhealthy and imply some sort of emotional dependence. These things might show up in our relationship with God and so at this point we might ask, why should I live to please God? So that we don’t have to feel guilty, to be accepted by God, gain the approval of the pastors, be a good Christian, to feel better about myself? We won’t get too far with this kind of motivation. It doesn’t work well with people and it doesn’t work with God.

Living worthy and pleasing God is different. Pleasing God is a free, voluntary, healthy way of living in the light of God’s presence as his people. If we start with trying to be a good Christian we are in trouble. Instead, we first immerse ourselves in God’s will, the foundational step of being filled. We so fully understand God’s acceptance, love, and grace that we are not living to gain those things, but rather know that we already have them. We also know that living for ourselves is foolish and unsatisfying. We want to please God simply because that is what we desire when we are filled with God’s fullness. God’s desires become our desires. We live from the inside. We know the father and we want to be like him.

Expressions of a Worthy Walk

What does a worthy life, pleasing to God is all things, look like? Paul lists four things, clearly marked by four participles. Each participial phrase includes a prepositional clause.

Bearing fruit in every good work. Bearing fruit was used in verse 6 to describe the work of the gospel. Here Paul applies the same word to a worthy life. A worthy life is a fruitful life. We are told in verse 21 that prior to hearing the gospel the Colossians were hostile to God and were characterized by evil works. But now that they have been grafted into Christ, they can bear fruit in every good work. And so can we. We can live fruitful, beautiful, attractive lives. Our evil deeds can be transformed into good works, actions that bring blessings to others. I am reminded of what Paul writes to the Ephesians: “For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Ephesians 2:10 *tniv*).

One of the places where my wife Liz and I see fruit in our lives is in our relationships with our elderly neighbors, who just celebrated 65 years of marriage a couple of days ago! As we take the time to look in on them, listen to their stories and pour over their photo albums, we are building a rich relationship that brings the love of God into their lives. I wonder sometimes if investing in this relationship with my neighbors is the most important kingdom work I have done

all year. This is what God calls us to: to engage in the lives of the people whom God brings our way and then expectantly watch as God produces spiritual fruit for his kingdom.

Growing in the knowledge of God. The word “growing” was also used in verse 6 to describe the work of the gospel. Here Paul applies this to the knowledge of God. Our relationship with God is a growing relationship where the knowing of each other goes deeper and deeper. We know him in a more real and personal way. This is reflected in marriage where over time two people become one because they know each other so deeply. As our intimacy with God increases, so does our holiness—and vice versa.

Being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience. This phrase speaks to what we need in order to live a worthy and God-pleasing life. What is necessary is God’s glorious might rather than our own strength. It doesn’t please God when we tough it out and rely on our own grit. It pleases God when we acknowledge our inadequacy and look to “all” the power of God, the power that was manifested in raising Jesus from the dead. God’s power is what enables us to walk worthy and please the Father.

Why do we need God’s power? It is because we do not have what is needed to handle the situations that we will encounter in this life. Life is hard. God’s power is needed to give us “all” endurance and patience. Endurance is the ability to remain under the pressure. It implies being able to stand firm and keep the position you have gained in battle. Patience means to be long-suffering and slow to anger. Patience is a fruit of the Spirit and it is part of God’s own character (Ex. 34.6).

I heard someone share a story about being a young mom, facing all the trials of early motherhood and the pains of growing up. One day she asked her mother, “Why didn’t you tell me life would be so hard?” The mother replied, “I knew you would find it out for yourself sooner or later.” Sooner or later, we all find it out. And for this we need God’s glorious might to walk worthily through life’s valleys.

Peter O’Brien has an insightful word when he says that:

1. “it is nothing less than God’s indwelling power which is required
2. “his glorious might’ is more than adequate
3. “this strength will be provided as the varying circumstances are confronted.”³

Giving joyful thanks to the Father. The final expression of a worthy walk is that we maintain a grateful heart. We don’t just give thanks but rather we give thanks with joy. Paul had this frame of mind as we talked about two weeks ago. Even though he was in prison he gave thanks to the Father for what he heard about the Colossians. A critical spirit and suppressed anger only rob us of life. Gratitude is not based on the physical circumstances of our life, but rather in delighting in God as our Father. F.F. Bruce comments that “theology is grace and ethics is gratitude.”⁴

Bearing fruit, growing, being strengthened, and giving thanks are the outward manifestations of the person who has been filled deeply with the knowledge of God’s will and walks the talk. But I want to remind you that we do not get there all at once. The Christian life is a process, a journey, a pilgrimage. The fact that Paul is praying for the Colossians means that they are still in process and face obstacles along the way. Therefore, we must not get discouraged, but simply keep heading in the right direction, staying on the right path and relying on the right resources.

This year Brian and I are a part of group of pastors who are being ministered to for the purpose of going deeper with God. When we stand up here and teach on Sunday we are not here as people who have it all together trying to help you get it all together. If that is what you want you are in the wrong place. I am still in process just like you and desire to grow deeper in my knowledge of God’s will. I would welcome your prayers for opportunity to grow this year.

Basis for Gratitude and Transformed Life

With the mention of giving thanks to the Father, Paul changes gears:

He (The Father) has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his people in the kingdom of light. For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. (Col 1: 12b-14)

Paul seems to launch in a completely different direction, however, I think the ideas here are connected to his prayer. What Paul says about the work of the father explains why we can always give thanks with joy and also why we can live with the anticipation of transformed lives that please God. We are going to talk more about these verses in the coming weeks, but let me make some brief comments.

The father’s actions on behalf of the Colossians – and on our behalf as well – are three-fold. First, he has qualified or fitted us to share in the inheritance of his people, his saints. The words “share” and “inheritance” refer to the Old Testament language of the land. Israel’s inheritance was the land. Each tribe received their share of the land. Now, as God’s people our inheritance is Christ, the hope of glory, the hope laid up in heaven that Paul referred to in verse 5. This inheritance is in the kingdom of God in the age to come.

Second, the father rescued us or delivered us from the dominion of darkness. Just as Israel was delivered from Egypt and from other enemies they faced, so God has delivered us from the realm, the tyranny and the power of darkness, where Satan holds sway, and placed us into the realm of light.

Third, the father has brought us, or transferred us, into the kingdom of his beloved Son. We have been transplanted from the realm of Satan to the kingdom of Jesus, from the world of darkness into the kingdom of light. We were in Adam and now we are in Christ. The tense of all three of these verbs make it clear that this has already happened. We have already been fitted, already been delivered, and already been transferred. (When Paul uses the phrase “kingdom of Christ” he is referring to the kingdom of God that is already but not yet. He uses the phrase, “kingdom of God” to refer to the consummated kingdom.)

What made all of this possible was the death of Jesus, through whom we have redemption and the forgiveness of sins. Redemption means that we were freed from imprisonment and bondage. Forgiveness is the companion blessing of the new covenant.

There is a lot of theology packed into these verses, and as I said, we will revisit these ideas in the upcoming weeks. But we might ask ourselves some questions: Do I have a clear picture of myself, what has happened to me, and the kingdom to which I now belong? Do I live in joyful gratitude for the father’s great work of love and grace? Do I live with confidence in walking in a worthy manner and pleasing God because I am a child of light completely redeemed and forgiven?

We become filled with God's will so we can please God based on what the Father and Son have accomplished for us.

May we find blessing today in the presence of the Father who created us, the Son who redeemed us, and the Spirit who sanctifies us. Amen.

A Closing Poem

You might have noticed how the trinity is represented in our text today. The Father makes us fit, delivers us from darkness, and transplants us into the kingdom of his Son. The Son redeems us through his blood, the blood that has cleansed us and continues to cleanse us. And the Spirit imparts to us the wisdom and understanding we need to truly know God and his ways.

I would like to close with a poem by George Herbert based on the Trinity. He wrote it for Trinity Sunday, the eighth Sunday after Easter in some church calendars. As I read it you will notice many "threes" which of course represent the trinity. Herbert's poem is prayer that reflects very simply and elegantly what we have been talking about this morning.

1. Peter O'Brien, *Colossians and Philemon*, (WBC; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 11.
2. James Wilhoit, *Spiritual Formation as if the Church Mattered*, (Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, 2008), 77.
3. Peter O'Brien, 24.
4. F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians*, (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1984), 49.

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Trinity Sunday

Lord, who hast formed me out of mud,
And hast redeemed me through thy blood,
And sanctified me to do good;

Purge all my sins done heretofore:
For I confess my heavy score,
And I will strive to sin no more.

Enrich my heart, mouth, hands in me,
With faith, with hope, with charity;
That I may run, rise, rest with thee.

George Herbert

This is what we believe by faith, pray by faith and live by faith.