

The story is told of a group of tourists who were visiting a small scenic village in Eastern Europe. As they walked through the village, they passed by an old man sitting beside a fence, who was carving a piece of wood. In a rather patronizing way, one tourist asked him, “Were any *great men* born in this village?” The old man replied, “Nope. No great men. *Only babies.*” That is just as true spiritually as it is physically. Faith in Christ begins with spiritual infancy. Jesus said: *“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God”* (John 3:3). Being “*born again*” means that after we are physically born we can also be spiritually “*born again*” into a new life through Jesus Christ.

When we are initially “*born again*” in Jesus Christ we are spiritual babes. And what that also means is that spiritual babies, just like physical babies, though they are cute beyond description, are not always so pleasant to be around. Ray Stedman has said that “a baby is a digestive apparatus with a loud noise at one end and no responsibility at the other.” Babies are notoriously selfish and self-centered. When babies are born, they bear the imprint of the fall of Adam; their whole world is centered around themselves. But it is only over time, as they grow and learn, and with proper parenting, guidance and discipline they learn the self-control to sleep all night, to feed themselves, and even use the toilet.

It is the same in the Christian life. While we are spiritually born in Christ, we are also to grow and mature spiritually in Christ. 1 Peter 2:2-3 tell us: *“Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up into salvation—if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.”* Hebrews 5:13-6:1 also tells us: *“For everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil. Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God.”*

One day a father was talking with his 5-year-old daughter about birthdays. Her birthday was March 30, his was March 27. The father told her, “My birthday is only three days before yours.” The little girl looked up at him and said, “Yeah, but you grew much faster than me.” Sadly many Christians do not grow up in their faith. The great weakness of the church is that many who claim Christ are spiritual babies all their lives. They claim to have put faith in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior but they never grow up. A story is told of a man, who after 25 years with the same company, doing the same job, for all of those 25 years, went to his employer and told him that he felt he was not being appreciated and deserved a promotion. “After all,” he said, “I have 25 years of experience.” His boss replied, “No, you haven’t had 25 years of experience; you’ve had one experience for 25 years.” Many who claim Christ never move beyond their initial experience with Jesus in their journey of faith.

Our spiritual life is a journey of faith: it has birth (a beginning) and a growth (progression toward maturity) and a death (aging to the end). Our coming to faith in Jesus Christ is not the end but just the very beginning of our journey of faith in Jesus Christ. This was the apostle Paul’s concern for the church in Colossae. There were a lot of false beliefs that were being taught and embraced by those in the early church regarding how they were to live out their faith in Jesus Christ – and Paul knew that was happening because those in the church had not grown up and matured in their faith. As Paul sat in prison for his faith in Christ, he heard those in the church at Colossae were struggling with a biblical understanding their faith and with living out their faith in Jesus Christ. And so he wrote them a letter to correct their misunderstanding and to exhort them to grow up in their faith in Jesus Christ.

*Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae: Grace to you and peace from God our Father. Colossians 1:1-2*

A few things to note here at the start. When Paul wrote, *"Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God"* he was not pride fully establishing his authority over those in the church – but he was simply stating the fact that God had sovereignly called him to faith in Christ - and God sovereignly chose him to serve Christ as a shepherd (pastor) to lead God's people through their struggle with sin and an into obedient surrender to the truth of God's Word - so they might move beyond their spiritual birth and on into a mature faith in Jesus Christ, which would then correct their false teaching and beliefs.

*"To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae."* The word *"saints"* here is literally *"holy ones"* meaning that God had not only called Paul to a maturity of faith - but God had also done the same for all of us in the church. Paul normally used the term *"saints"* when he wrote to the churches, but here he also calls them *"faithful."* This is the first hint of the struggles going on in the church at Colossae. In knowing that *some* were believing in their own ideas and interpretations of God's Word, which was turning them away from God's truth - Paul encourages all of those in the church to remain *"faithful"* to God's calling and God's truth. He emphasizes this further when he addresses those in the church as *"brothers"* (and sisters) *"in Christ at Colossae."* The original language here says, *"in Christ who are IN Colossae"* not *"AT Colossae."* Now that might not seem to be a big deal but Paul is trying to make a point here. What Paul is saying, is that just as the Colossians were living *"IN Colossae"* – so as *"saints"*, as *"holy ones"* called and chosen by God, they are also to live first and foremost *"in"* Christ.

*To live in Christ means* Jesus lives *"in"* us. Our entire lives: heart, mind, soul, and strength – are *in Christ*. *To live in Christ means* the priorities, attitudes, and behaviors of Christ should be the same priorities, attitudes, decisions, and behaviors *"in"* our lives. *To live in Christ means* we have been adopted *"in"* to a new family, a holy family, an eternal family. *"To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ IN Colossae."* The apostle then writes: *"Grace to you and peace from God our Father."* Though corrective in nature, Paul intended his letter to the Colossians to also be a means of *God's grace* to them, so that they might see the spiritual immaturity of their misunderstanding and false beliefs - so they might turn back to God and pursue maturity of faith in Jesus. He also wished them *"peace"* which is the traditional Hebrew word *"shalom"* which reflects harmony and wholeness with God and with one another. Paul acknowledges that *grace* and *peace* cannot come about by human effort but *"from God our Father."* We can only and truly know God's grace and peace when we are *"in"* Christ.

*We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven.*  
Colossians 1:3-5a

Paul begins the content of his letter by thanking God. We liked to be thanked and we thank each other - but we should *"always thank God"* first. He is the author of life, the source of everything we have and everything we can do. *"We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."* Paul praises God for His sovereign hand over the entirety of our lives. He also thanked God for the *faith*, the *love* and the *hope* of those in Colossae - implying that God is the author and source of their faith, love and hope: *"We always thank God . . . since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven."* The faith the apostle Paul commends them for is their *"faith in Christ Jesus."* Not faith in a person or a program or a church, but *"faith in Christ Jesus."* This is not a faith to be possessed or believed in but a faith which is to be a vibrant force passionately expressed in the how we live out our lives – a faith that unites us not by mutual interests but by our mutual love for God and for one another. In John 13:35 Jesus said, *"By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."*

In these words we read of Paul thanking God that our hope in God *is the source* of our faith in Christ and love for one another. The Colossians had faith and love because of what? Because of *“the hope laid up for (them) . . . in heaven.”* That’s contrary to what most of us believe. Most of us have been taught that hope is grounded in faith, that we must have faith to have hope. But God’s Word formulates it differently. Paul says that faith is grounded in hope, not the other way around. Hope in God is not personal expectation but rather an anticipated reality. Hope here refers to something that is already a reality, something that is already assured - something that is *“laid up”* for us *“in heaven.”* What is that *“hope”* - the anticipated reality that is already assured and is now *“laid up”* for us *“in heaven”*? Well, Paul speaks of that hope in Titus 2:13 when he spoke of *“waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.”* Paul will also speak of this in Colossians 3:4 when he writes, *“When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.”*

Our assured *hope* is that Jesus has risen from the dead – and he is living in us! Jesus, the image of God, in whom all things were created, the firstborn among the dead, living and breathing - *is living in us!* That’s our joyous hope! For those of us in Christ, whether in Colossae or in Port Alberni, this implies that we are continuously being changed and transformed back into the image of God that we were created for, which we will fully know and realize on the day we die and are resurrected from the dead. Jesus said: *“I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die”* (John 11:25-26). Our *“hope”* - the risen Jesus Christ - is *“laid up . . . in heaven”* and at work within the hearts and lives of those who are truly *“in Christ.”* Faith and love are rooted in our hope in Jesus who rose up to heaven *and* at work within us!

*Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.*

Colossians 1:5-8

Paul calls the reality that faith and love are rooted in our hope in Jesus, who rose up to heaven and is at work within us, *“the word of the truth, the gospel.”* Dorothy Sayers once said, *“The test of any religion is not whether it pleases us or is comfortable, but whether it is true.”* It is *true* that Jesus was crucified on a cross for the forgiveness of our sins. It is also *true* that he rose from the dead so that those who do open their hearts and surrender their lives to him will also rise from the dead. It is also *true* that Jesus lives within those who know him as Lord and Savior so they might live for him and grow mature in their faith. That is *“the word of the truth, the gospel.”* It is real. It works. It worked for me. It will work for you. The gospel does change and transform. The gospel continues to change and transform. It is, at this very moment *“bearing fruit and increasing”* in the hearts and lives of those who are *“in Christ.”*

Just as a tree without fruit would no longer be a tree, so the gospel without the fruit of truth would no longer be the gospel. Many argue in this age of individualism and entitlement that the gospel of Jesus Christ has lost its ability to *bear the fruit of God’s truth*. It does seem that way because even evangelical Christians today often see the *truth* of the gospel in terms of how relative or pragmatic it might be in reference to how they have decided to live their lives. For many Christians, biblical truth has been abdicated by personal opinion and individual preferences. Robert Wuthnow, a sociologist of religion, wrote that *“spirituality is no longer true or good because it meets absolute standards of truth or goodness, but because it helps me get along. I am the judge of its worth. If it helps me find a vacant parking place, I know I am on the right track. But if it leads me into the wilderness calling me to face dangers I would rather not deal with at all, then it is a form of spirituality I am unlikely to choose.”*

Brothers and sisters, we must acknowledge that we live in a predominantly secular culture and we are under constant pressure to conform to the views, beliefs and values of the world we live in. And God's people are fading fast when it comes to bearing the fruit of the truth of the gospel. The church is not turning the world upside down because we are too much like the world. Paul's context was not much different than ours. He feared the church would choose to follow the world rather than grow deeper up in their walk with Jesus, which would the cause them to define their own gospel of truth, that would fit nicely into their own lives. Once Paul heard that was happening in Colossae, he began to pray that the church would come to know the power and joy of following Jesus – because God is pleased when we live out the gospel of the work of the cross of Christ in our lives in pursuit of spiritual maturity.

*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, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. Colossians 1:9-14*

Paul first prayed that those in the church would “*be filled with the knowledge of his will.*” Knowing the will of God is how we begin to grow in Christ. But this “*knowledge*” is not a “*knowledge*” that we are to *know* for its own sake. This is a “*knowledge*” that is to have a dramatic, transforming effect, a *knowing* that is to result in something which we see in verse 10: “*so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him.*” Knowing God's will is where many Christians go astray in that they think *the will of God* is something they must personally find and discover. They ask, “What is God's will for MY life?” when the real question is simply “What is God's will?” The will of God is the same for all of us. It is God's will we love God with all of our hearts, minds, soul, and strength. Love our neighbors as ourselves. Seek first the Kingdom of God. Deny ourselves, take up our crosses and follow Jesus. Love one another. Forgive one another. Bear with one another. Obey our leaders. Give joyfully and sacrificially. Serve faithfully. Whether we eat or drink, or whatever we do, do all for the glory of God.

Yet many still want more details. They want to know *exactly* and *precisely* what is God's will *for their own personal* lives. And that's the problem. This is what Paul is addressing here. He knew that we all have the fallen, sinful tendency to define our own *self-centered gospel*, so are we prone to develop a our own *self-centered will of God*. It's like the story of an old Scottish woman who went house-to-house across the countryside selling thread, buttons and shoe strings. When she would come to a fork in the road she would toss a stick up in the air and go in the direction it pointed when the stick landed. One day, however, she was seen repeatedly tossing the stick. Someone stopped and asked, her “Why do you keep tossing up that stick?” “Because,” she replied, “it keeps pointing to the left and I just want to go to the right.” Sometimes, more times than we are probably willing to admit, we try to know God's will in the same way. And so we confuse God's will with our will – *by making our will God's will.*

Paul prayed those in the church would “*be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding.*” The only way that we can truly “*be filled with the knowledge of his will*” is by having “*spiritual wisdom*” and “*spiritual understanding.*” The words “*wisdom*” and “*understanding*” are defined differently in the Greek than in English. “*Spiritual wisdom*” is not an abstract, theological knowledge that we possess and use to correct others, but rather a practical application of the truths and principles of God revealed by the Holy Spirit that regulate our personal thoughts, attitudes and behaviors. “*Spiritual wisdom*” is given to us by God through His Spirit, not so that we might correct others, *but so that we might be corrected.* The “*spiritual understanding*” spoken of here then is the application of God's “*spiritual wisdom*” in our lives regarding specific circumstances or situations that we go through.

And so when we are faced with a problem or a struggle we are to 1) pray that the Holy Spirit would give us “*spiritual wisdom*” as to how the truths and principles of the Word of God relate to our problem or struggle and then- 2) we are to pray that the Holy Spirit would give us “*spiritual understanding*” as to what action God wants us to take to deal with the problem or struggle we are going through. The Holy Spirit is the one who gives us the “*wisdom*” to know what God says; the Holy Spirit is the one who gives us the “*understanding*” to know what to do with “*the knowledge of his will.*”

Paul then tells us the reason he prayed the church would be filled with the knowledge of God’s will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding was so that - those in the church would “*walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him.*” The word “*walk*” here in the Greek literally means “to order one’s behavior” In the context of our verse, this would mean that when we are “*filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding*” - we would then order our behavior “*in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him.*” We saw this exemplified in Genesis 5:24 when we read that a man named “*Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him.*” Enoch was so filled with the knowledge of God’s will, in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, that he walked in manner so worthy of God, which so pleased God that, God did not allow Enoch to die. God just “*took him.*”

The word for “*walk*” signifies we are to go on habitually forward in making progress toward holiness. Paul tells us that when we have “*spiritual wisdom and understanding*” it will dramatically transform our lives, enabling us to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord fully pleasing to him. God is pleased when we live out the gospel of the work of the cross of Christ in our lives in pursuit of spiritual maturity. Paul affirms this in Philippians 2:12-13 when he said, “*work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.*” In our text the apostle Paul further tells us what the gospel of the work of Christ in us, that pleases God, looks like:

“*Bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.*” It first looks like, “*bearing fruit.*” God created us to bear fruit. The first command God gave to both created creatures and to created humanity was: “*Be fruitful and multiply!*” (Genesis 1:22, 28). In John 15:7-8 Jesus said: “*If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.*” What kind of “*fruit*” are we to bear? The fruit of the gospel and the fruit of the Spirit that God desires in our lives is everywhere in Scripture: the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, humility, sacrifice, self-control, compassion, encouragement, service, forgiveness, mercy and grace.

“*Bearing fruit - in every good work and increasing.*” The phrase “*every good work*” here is viewed not as any kind of work or anything we must do - that is a required for entering into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. Rather, this the fruit of salvation in the life of a mature born-again Christian. Paul’s reference to bearing fruit and “*increasing*” brings to mind Jesus’ parable of the sower - who sowed seed in the good soil that bore fruit thirtyfold, sixtyfold, and a hundredfold (Mark 4:1-9, 13-20).

“*Bearing fruit in every good work and increasing - in the knowledge of God.*” God delights in those who seek to know Him and understand Him. God loves it when people seek to grow deeper in their relationship with Him and grow in their knowledge of Him. This is also where many Christians fall short. They have a lot of knowledge *about* God - but their lives do not reflect a relational knowledge of God that has changed their hearts, lives and souls. Knowing God in many ways is like trying to define a kiss. A great deal of what it means to kiss is lost in the translation. Kissing is something you must really experience before you begin to understand it. The old axiom about money says the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. This is also true in a spiritual sense. Just as sin is by nature a *vicious cycle* of degradation, a personal relational knowing God is a *virtuous cycle* which leads us joyfully deeper into the personal presence of God’s heart - “*increasing in the knowledge of God.*”

*“Strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy.”* Christianity is not a do-it-yourself religion. The only strength we have is that which comes from God – whether it be coming to faith in Jesus or pursuing a deeper walk with Jesus. Again Paul affirmed this when he said: *“Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”* We truly are *“strengthened with all power”* by God, who does so *“according to His glorious might.”* The Greek word here for *“power”* is *dunamis* (dynamite) which means *inherent* power, a power *residing* in a person or thing by virtue of its nature (God’s power) – and the Greek word for *“might”* is *“kratos”* which means *manifested* power that is *put forth* in *action*. And so the power to live our lives for Jesus to live out the gospel in a way that pleases God - is not our power but the power of God *residing in us* (*dunamis*) and the power of God *at work in us* (*kratos*).

Spiritual growth and maturity are manifested in us and through us when we embrace God’s power in us and through us *“for all endurance and patience with joy.”* Paul emphasized how this works in the two Greek words here. The Greek word for *“patience”* is in regard to difficult *circumstances* that we can’t control - and the Greek word for *“endurance”* is in regard to difficult *people* whom we can’t control either. It is by the strength of God’s power - *“according to his glorious might”* - both in us and through us - that we can *patiently endure* times of trial and endure the sinful struggles of others *“with joy”* – because God is supremely sovereign and providentially omnipotent over all situations and all people -

*“Giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”* One of the greatest marks of spiritual maturity is gratitude. Thankfulness to God is woven all throughout the fabric of the Bible. Paul thanks God by reminding us here that we have been graciously transformed by the gospel. God has qualified us and delivered us and transferred us and redeemed us and forgiven us – and we now we belong to God, and that relationship cannot be broken. Gratitude in its deepest sense allows us to joyfully live out our lives as grateful gifts of grace from God. True gratefulness is a quiet notion; those who humbly choose to be joyfully thankful don’t call attention to themselves – but rather they point others toward God.

*The power of following Jesus* is the *power* of gospel in risen Christ that lives within the heart of those who are truly following Jesus. *The joy of following Jesus* is the *joy* of pursuing spiritual maturity as God works in us, both to will and to work for his good pleasure - filled with the knowledge of God’s will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of our Lord Jesus; fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all power, according to God’s glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy; giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light – so we might turn the world upside down, by living out the gospel of Jesus Christ and sharing the gospel of Jesus Christ as we passionately proclaim the glory of God in Christ for the joy of all people.

God is pleased when we live out the work of the cross of Jesus Christ in our lives in pursuit of spiritual maturity. But that is not so easy for us because pursuing spiritual maturity is a matter of who or what captures our hearts – and in a world that offers us easy access to so many immediate, attractive pleasures, we most often give our hearts to people and things that take less effort, less sacrifice and are less painful than following Jesus. But Herbert Lockyer once wrote: *“The most difficult journey has a blessed climax when the goal is God.”* This is what we were created for. This is our call at Arrowsmith. The eternal destiny of our families, our friends, our community and our world is dependent upon our response to that call. And we can fulfill that call - by the power and joy of following Jesus! May we join with the apostle Paul in this as in Philippians 3:14-15 he declared: *“I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Let those of us who are mature think this way!”* Amen?

2020-01-12

Pastor Leland Botzet

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