

Do any of you find it hard to be a Christian today? I mean, with all of the narcissism and materialism in our culture. Those things try to convince us to place other things before God. It often seems that the basic building blocks of our faith are at odds with culture. In a world that values self-sufficiency and power we proclaim that we are dependent on God. The idea that Jesus is the only way of salvation is also at odds with a society that cannot understand how we can disagree with other religions and still respect them at the same time.

The Christians at Colossae faced a similar situation. So, the Apostle Paul wrote this letter to encourage them to stay rooted in the Gospel because “*the gospel is bearing fruit and growing throughout the whole world*” (v. 6) says Paul. Paul, who was probably in prison when he wrote this letter, had heard about them. Epaphras, one of his coworkers, started the church and had reported about their struggle to be faithful.

Seth McFarlane, the creator of the television show *Family Guy*, booked a seat on 9/11/2001 on American Airlines Flight 11 from Boston to Los Angeles. But because he arrived late to the airport, he missed his flight that hijackers flew into the North Tower of the World Trade Center. Yet when someone asked him if that made him think of the rest of his life as a “gift,” McFarlane answered, “That experience didn’t change me at all. It made no difference in the way I live my life. It made no difference in the way I look at things. It was just a coincidence.”

Lew Smedes, a pastoral counselor and author, defied 20-1 odds of surviving lungs filled with blood clots. When his doctor congratulated him, he didn’t feel particularly grateful, partly because he hadn’t thought about dying. A couple of nights later, however, Smedes felt himself, what he called, “seized with a frenzy of gratitude.” He recalls, “My arms rose straight up by themselves. A hundred-pound weight could not have held them at my side. My hands open, my fingers spread, waving, twisting, while I blessed the Lord above for the almost unbearable goodness of being alive on this good earth in this good body at this present moment.”

Paul begins his letter to the Colossian Christians by telling them that when he prays for them, he *always* thanks God for them. Why? Because they’re so smart or successful? No, the apostle thanks God for the Colossians’ faith and love that are growing out of the fertile soil that is their hope in Jesus Christ. But that doesn’t necessarily mean the Colossians like

each other. Paul thanks God because God has begun to replace their anger and lies with gentleness and forgiveness. The Christians at Colossae are learning to lovingly accept people in their city who came from different races, backgrounds, and cultures.

That love as well as their Christian faith “*spring from the hope stored up for you in heaven*” (v. 5), says Paul. The Gospel isn’t, after all, just a set of truths about Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. It’s also the power through which God is at work. The Apostle Paul wrote this letter to encourage the Colossians to stay rooted in the Gospel, because “*the gospel is bearing fruit and growing*” (v. 6) says Paul. It produces not just a new understanding of who God is, but also a new creation that is faith and love in action—energized by real hope.

Paul has probably never met the Colossian Christians to whom he writes this letter. He has heard of them from his colleague Ephraim, who planted their church. Yet what Paul has heard about the Colossians fills him with thanksgiving which he pours out in his prayers to God. So, with all that thankfulness, is there any reason for him to be writing to the Colossians?

Colossians 1 urges us to think about the faith and love that’s concretely growing from our own hope in Jesus Christ. We could consider the ways we see our own church loving and caring for each other in times of trouble. Yet notice the apostle doesn’t just pray thanksgiving for the Colossian Christians. He also says he never stops praying for them. Take verse 9, for example: “*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, you see, he suggests that something is still lacking in Colossae in spite of all the amazing things they’re doing. There’s no need to fill a gas tank that’s already full of gasoline, is there? That’s what we’ve all been wishing lately. Right? Paul does suggest that the Colossians do not yet have the wisdom and understanding to fully know the will of God. I wonder if there’s a church anywhere that couldn’t use more wisdom and understanding to know God’s will? They’re faithful, loving, and hopeful people, but they aren’t completely wise or understanding. They still need more wisdom from the Spirit.

Notice also that the apostle implies this is something they can’t do on their own. Remember, he just prayed that God fills them with the knowledge of God’s will. That suggests the Colossian believers need God to give them complete spiritual wisdom and

understanding to know his will. God’s children often prefer to hurry up and quickly figure out what God wants us to do, so that we can quickly do it—and check it off our list. However, Paul reminds us that before we can do that, we first need God to act in us and through us.

On Pentecost the church celebrated the equipping of Jesus’ followers by the Holy Spirit to boldly speak the Gospel in a variety of languages. We remember how Peter insisted God pour out his Spirit on *all* who call on God’s name through Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit equips us to prophesy, dream dreams and see visions. Paul describes to his faithful brothers and sisters in Christ the tools the Holy Spirit gives us in order to speak and obey God’s Word in that way. The Holy Spirit graciously provides “*the knowledge of God’s will through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives*” (v. 9).

Verse 9 is Paul’s first reference to the real reason for writing this letter. Heresy seems to have grown deep roots in their young church. So, the apostle is trying to dig up those roots by disproving any false doctrines. Yet Paul also understands that he can’t do that by himself. So, he tells the Colossian Christians that he’s praying God will fill them with the knowledge of God’s will, and with spiritual wisdom and understanding. Jesus is the Word of God made flesh. He is God in human form. When we ask, “What does God want me to do?” we can look at Jesus to see what God *did*. You probably remember the question, “WWJD—What would Jesus do?” that was popular some years back. But to know what Jesus would do, we need to know what he *did*; and what God *did* in history. Our source of that information is the Scriptures. That is why reading the Word of God and studying it is so important. That is also why Bible studies and Sunday School classes are important. Yes, we can read the Bible by ourselves, but studying it with the help of others helps us gain from the shared perspectives and the shared wisdom of other Christian people.

The second thing that Paul says he is praying for is: “*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*” (1:10). It is one thing to *know* the will of God, but it is another thing to *do* it. We can intend to do the right thing all we want but it is no good until we act. This is where the rubber meets the road in terms of our faith. We can ask “What would Jesus do?” But then we have to *do* it, or the asking was pointless.

Paul speaks of the Colossians “*bearing fruit in every good work*” (v. 10). Elsewhere Paul lists the fruit of the Spirit as being “*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.*” (Galatians 5:22-23) Fruit is something that

grows on a tree because of the kind of tree it is. Apple trees produce apples. Peach trees grow peaches. And we Christians are supposed to produce the fruit of the Spirit because we are people of God's Spirit. But Paul doesn't stop there. He goes on in verse 10 to add, "*growing in the knowledge of God.*" This is perhaps only common sense but it's worth repeating: Doing God's will leads to a deeper knowledge of God. We can't just sit in our ivory tower contemplating God and know God. We have to act on what we have learned if we want to continue to learn more of God's will.

The last thing he says he is praying for is that: "*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 holy people in the kingdom of light*" (1:11-12). We don't make ourselves strong. I know I ask you to study the Bible and to put into practice what you learn. But ultimately our actions are not necessarily a sign of bearing "*the fruit of the gospel.*" It is the power of God that dwells in us that enables us to bear fruit, in the same way that only God can enable the apples and peaches and pears to grow on the trees. Our actions simply open or close the door to that power. We should give our thanks to God for this great gift. He has "*qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light,*" as verse 12 says. We didn't do it ourselves. God did it for us as.

And remember, we don't need God to complete our knowledge of God's will so we can win Bible trivia contests. We want God to expand our knowledge so that we can live more like Christ. We read and study the Scriptures, we participate in the sacraments and sing Christian songs and hymns. We read the Christian classics, like C.S. Lewis' *Mere Christianity* or Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. We learn and recite our creeds and confessions. Yet none of that will help complete our understanding of God's will—without God's helping hand.

Paul insists that a worthy life is lived "*by bearing fruit [the fruit of the Gospel and the fruit of the Spirit] in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God*" (v. 10). The Gospel produces all sorts of tasty "fruits," when we live lives worthy of the Lord; growing in the knowledge of God; "*being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that we may have great endurance and patience*" (v. 11). Brothers and sisters: Let us seek to know *both* God and God's will. And let us endeavor to *accomplish* his will, because any strength we have is not from us. It is a gift from God.

God bless this simple witness to his word. Amen.