

Introduction

Please turn with me in your Bibles to Colossians chapter 1. We are in our third week of going through this letter from the Apostle Paul to the church in Colossae, and we are going to continue to build on the ideas that we have been talking about for the last two weeks. As we continue, we remember that this is a letter. As a letter, we are still in the formal portion of it. We are still in the part that plays by the rules of letter writing (or at least Paul's form of letter writing). So we forge ahead on this first century letter, continuing Paul's prayer for the people of Colossae. We are reading **Colossians**

1.9-14:

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.

So we started with the Greeting, establishing both parties, we followed with the prayer of Thanksgiving, and now we jump into the prayer of petition. Last week we saw Paul offer up praise for what he saw in the life of the Colossians. He thanked God for the work that the Gospel was doing in their lives. He did this as a means of praise to God as well as a way to encourage them. To remind them that even though things seem less than miraculous in their lives, that God's work was bringing about change in them. The gospel was continuing to bear fruit and increase, even when things seemed so normal. He kept pointing them back to the source of that work...the hope that they had been given in Jesus Christ. The fact that as long as they held on to that hope, fought for that truth, they could be assured that God's Work was being done in their lives.

This week Paul offers another prayer, but in this one He requests something from God. He is not talking about something that God has done, but He is petitioning God to do something. He is making His requests known to God. And His requests here are not for Himself. He is not praying that God do something in his life, bless him in some way, or take away a struggle that he has. He is praying earnestly for the lives of people he has

never met. In other words, Paul is more passionately devoted to the spiritual lives of people he has never met than most of us are for our best friends.

And the reason is because we don't pray ceaselessly is because we don't actually believe that prayer works. And the reason that we don't think it works is because most of us don't really know how it is supposed to function in the first place.

For most of us, prayer has been laid out as either:

1. a conversation with God

In this scenario, we simply give God a call when we need something, or when we feel like it. But the problem is that we really have a hard time knowing what to say, and we don't often feel like it. Prayers tend to seem contrived, forced, and without purpose.

2. a time to ask for stuff

This is like a visit to Santa's workshop at the mall, where we get to go sit on God's knee and tell Him all of the things that we would like Him to give to us. And like a visit to Santa, we don't really expect God to do anything about it. We ask as one of the many things that we are doing; we plan, we organize, we scheme, and oh, we should probably pray too.

There are other variations, but these are the top two. Like most things, neither of these are entirely wrong, though they tend to skew why prayer should be a normal part of our lives. What both of these approaches tend to do is underscore what is happening when we come to God. Prayer is not just something that we do because we are supposed to or because it makes God happy. Prayer is part of a larger relationship. If we take prayer outside of this understanding it can become all sorts of things it was never intended to be. So what is it?

If we look at the story arc of the bible we see it begins with a Creator God who creates a people in His image. We see in Genesis that God has a close personal relationship with Adam and Eve. But this relationship had specific roles, just like any and all relationships do. In this relationship, God is the all powerful Creator, and people are the creation. People have been given a great deal, but all of this comes directly from God. The relationship was conditioned on the fact that people remained dependent on God, that the creation remembered who the Creator was. One rule was given to Adam and Eve to ensure their submission to God...do not eat from that tree. But they did. And all of a sudden the relationship between the Creator and His creation was severed. So the

OT plays out as God making ways that His people can come into relationship with Him...but these systems are always a step away, they are not a full reconciliation of the relationship. So God acts to make relationship possible once again, as Paul describes it in our verse today:

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.

Jesus Christ came down and died so that we could be reunited in relationship with Him. This required our sins being covered so that we could enter into the presence of a Holy God. We are qualified by Him to inherit the status of saints. He transfers us into the Kingdom. And now as saints in the kingdom, we are able to approach the Creator God. We are able to have a relationship with Him. We are able to bring our requests before Him. We are able to do this because of what he has done, and we must do this because we still depend on Him.

Prayer than, is an act of submission. It is a recognition that God is in control and we are not. We see Paul coming to God first and foremost, as the means by which God's Work will be done. We see Him doing this over and over again, because He knows that without the help of God, none of it is possible. We see Paul petitioning God specifically for things that God delights in.

So what does He ask God for? Paul asks God that:

- 1. They be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding,*
- 2. That they walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work*
- 3. That they be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy*

Or another way to put this is: that they KNOW GOD, that they LIVE GOD, and that they ENDURE IN GOD.

Paul begins by requesting that they be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding. What he is yearning for is not they develop a super-theology. Paul does not desire a people who walk around using their knowledge of who God is as a tool for their own ends. Instead, he is asking specifically for a knowledge of God's will and a spiritual wisdom. He is asking that they be able to see God's rhythm, His plan for the world. How God created it to work. He desires that the people of Colossae gain an understanding of how the gospel interacts with every part of their life. What he is praying for is discernment. And Paul realizes that Spiritual wisdom does not come from being wicked smart and able to ethically disassemble every situation. Instead, it requires submitting to God (understanding our place in the relationship) and allowing His revealed plan to replace ours. The word filled here implies that there is no room for anything else.

And God does not leave it up to us to create Him. He created us. And then He told us who He is. Our part in this is to interact with God in the ways that He has given us to interact: His Word and prayer. Our part is to receive the Spiritual wisdom that He gives us. **1 Corinthians 2.7-12** gives us a picture of how we receive this wisdom:

But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But, as it is written,
“What no eye has seen, nor ear heard,
nor the heart of man imagined,
what God has prepared for those who love him”—
these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God.

Christians are given a secret and hidden wisdom of God. That is why we call this series MYSTERY. It is not a mystery that continue to be a mystery; it is the mystery that has been hidden for ages, the mystery of God's Will, is now available to us in the Spirit and in the Word. We no longer need Prophets and Priests to be intermediates for us, it is

now available to us. God tells us exactly who He is and how he wants His people to act. So the first step is knowing, the second step is actually acting.

So Paul prays that they *walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work.*

So we must have the wisdom to know the Will of God, to understand His plan of redemption made evident in the life and death of Jesus, and then we must actually do what this implies. We see the facts, we know the plan, now it is time for us to respond in how we live. We don't take this great gift that God has given us and bury it in the ground. As Charles Spurgeon put it: *a Christian is not just to be safe, but also to be useful.* And the measure of our usefulness is in how our will conforms to that of God's.

And this is the catch22 that every Christian struggles with. I know what I am supposed to do, but I keep doing otherwise. Or as Paul puts it: *I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.* When Paul reveals this struggle, it is not a license to throw in the towel and keep sinning. Instead, it is an acknowledgement that there is a battle to fight. It is the acknowledgment that our default is to act against God. That it actually takes work to bear fruit in every good work.

When I say work, I very much mean our part. Paul does not ask God to help them walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, he implies that God illuminating their hearts to His Will is enough to stir them on. That if they see who God is, that their desires and actions will become more and more in line with each other. This is sanctification, the progress of our hearts as we are shaped to be made more and more like Jesus. As our idols are broken down and we are filled more and more with the Spiritual Wisdom of God. Our desires change, and in time, so does our actions. Slowly but surely we are changed. This process is confusing, mostly because of the way that we think of process.

We have to remind ourselves that Christianity has its roots in the Middle East and that an Eastern way of thinking is very different from ours. We tend to think linearly, like a timeline. This precedes this, and this leads to this. We'll refer to this as the a to b to c way of viewing things. And this trickles down into the way that we view everything. We have a goal, and whatever it takes to accomplish that goal is fair game. The focus is on making it from A to B.

An Eastern mindset is different. It is circular. Think of the Chinese calendar. Things happen in cycles. It is not about the destination as much as it is about the journey. In Eastern life you see much more routine. Or at least the routine holds intrinsic value in itself.

The reason that I point this out is that this passage has an aspect of circular patterning that blows the doors off of how we think of God working in us. If you read, Paul prays that:

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.

The way that Paul structures this sentence is not just to say increasing in the knowledge of God (simply repeating what he already prayed for), but it implies that their walking in a manner worthy of the Lord will help to increase their knowledge of God. So another way to say this: the knowledge of God conforms the way we act, which increase the knowledge of God, which conforms the way we act...So this process is not a do this and this will happen sort of movement. Instead, what we see here is a repetitious faithfulness. A going back to the Bible and back to God in prayer even when you can't see exactly how it is working. We know it works because it is How God says He created it to be. Sanctification is another way in which we submit to God. We follow the commands that He has given us, not because we understand them or exactly how they work, but because He promises that they lead to a greater knowledge of Him. This is not a circular process like a dog chasing His tail, getting nowhere. Instead think of this like moving circular, but as you move around the circle gets bigger. It is increasing. So you are changing, but it is not the kind of change where you graduate and move away from the basics. The basics are what keep feeding you.

A misunderstanding of this is where most backsliding Christians break down. They either get tired of the repetition. They get tired of not knowing the end game; about not being in control of the process. OR they create a process that they can control. Do these things and we promise these results. Learn this and you can move up the spiritual totem pole. Here is a list of rules we came up with that have nothing to do with anything

the Bible says, but will make you appear to be the kind of person that we think God wants you to be. And so you sit in shame when you fail as other are promoted or you are promoted and you look down on those who didn't conform to the will of some person's list.

So Paul prays for the power to endure. His final prayer is that the Christians of Colossae remember why they are walking in a manner, why they are fighting the good fight, and running the race marked out before them. He prays:

May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father

The spiritual wisdom comes from God, WE walk in a manner worthy, but it is only in God's power that we endure. The Christian life is not about how you do for a season. To walk in a manner worthy of the Lord implies that this is what you are doing for the rest of your life. There is no retirement. There is no vacation. Your life has been purchased. It now belongs to God.

That might be a somewhat scary idea if it were some other person that we had to rely on. It would be impossible to keep on if we had a God who we didn't know. This is why the knowledge of God is so important. We know who he is, and we have seen that He our God is a good God. He is not just some cosmic killjoy who wants to see how far he can push us before we break. He is a God that cares for us and personally acted to bring us back into relationship with Himself.

And He didn't do this because He needed the company. God worked to bring us into relationship because it is what we need. Spiritual wisdom opens up our eyes to the fact that we need Him. It leads us to not just endure by white-knuckling it and making it through. It actually makes it a joy. Reminding ourselves of who are God is and what He has done will change our perspective on why we are enduring in the first place. It will change our hearts from dutifully carrying out good works, to lovingly pleasing our Father in heaven. God reveals to us the mystery of His will, how He created the world to function, His rhythm and pattern of life, so that we would see it and glorify Him, giving thanks to God the Father.