

HOW TO PLEASE GOD
COLOSSIANS 1:9-14

I.

In much of the world people have a genuine desire to please God. This past Thursday was Aid Al Fitr, the celebration of the conclusion of Ramadan, the month of fasting for Muslims. During this month Muslims are not to drink or eat between sunrise and sundown. In Islamic countries the participation rate is estimated to be as high as 93%.

Christianity is the largest religion in the world. There are all kinds of ways in which Christians have sought to please God. In the early history of the church there were some who decided that the best way to please God was to live a life of self-denial and ascetism. There was a man by the name of Simeon Stylites who decided to become a monk. For the last 37 years of his life he lived on a platform 50 feet above the ground and one meter square. Supposedly he never came down from that platform. Food was sent up to him, and other things were brought down from him. People visited him there, and he preached, at times, to large crowds. According to the famous British historian Edward Gibbon, “... **his most familiar practice was that of bending his meagre skeleton from the forehead to the feet; and a curious spectator, after numbering twelve hundred and forty-four repetitions, at length desisted from the endless account.**” (*The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Vol. 4, Chapter 37)

We who try to live our lives according to the Bible recognize the importance of pleasing God. He created us. He created the world and the universe in which we live. He sent His Son to die for us. He sustains us. Some day he will be our Judge. We ought to be concerned about pleasing this great God to whom we owe so much and to whom we are accountable. The passage before us this morning tells us about how we can please God.

Two weeks ago we began our study of the New Testament Book of Colossians. We learned that the Apostle Paul was a prisoner in Rome between 60 and 62 AD when he got a report from a Christian leader by the name of Epaphras about his home church in Colossae (PROJECTOR ON--- COLOSSAE MAP 1) in western Asia Minor. Paul had never visited that church, but he had a keen interest in the progress of the gospel in that part of the world. He had introduced the gospel to what is today western Turkey when he preached and taught in the city of Ephesus (COLOSSAE EPHESUS MAP) for a couple of years on his third missionary journey. Probably this guy Epaphras had been converted through Paul's ministry and brought the story of Jesus to his hometown of Colossae.

Now Epaphras was looking for advice from the apostle about how to handle false teachers who were trying to lead the Christians in Colossae astray. Paul in this letter will

give him advice about that. Last time, two weeks ago, we saw that he began his letter with a strong note of encouragement. He especially commended the Christians in this small church for their faith in God and their love for one another and their hope for the future. Now he describes his prayer for these Christians. In doing that he tells us about two basic things that people should do to please God.

I.

The first thing that Christians should do is KNOW GOD'S WILL. (I. KNOW GOD'S WILL) That is described for us in v. 9 of Colossians #1. Notice that this is a prayer. Also it is one long sentence in the original language which does not conclude until v. 14. Paul begins, "**And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you,...**" What did Paul hear? He heard a report from Epaphras about the condition of the church at Colossae. That report apparently contained news of transformed lives. For in the first eight verses Paul encourages these Christians for their faith and hope and love.

That report has also prompted Paul not to cease praying for them. That means that he prayed for the church and its members regularly. He did it in group prayer meetings. He did it in his own private times of prayer. I suspect that he also did it when the Colossians just came to his mind. I pointed out last time that, except for Epaphras and perhaps a couple of other people whom he does not mention, Paul did not know the Colossian Christians personally. I suggested that this might be a motivation for some of us to pick out one of our missionary families and the people among whom they work to pray for them in some kind of regular way.

I had an older Christian friend once who taught this simple little saying, "When you think of me, pray for me." "When you think of me, pray for me." That may not seem especially profound. But I have found it to be a helpful reminder for me to pray for people. When people come to my mind, when I see people I know, I try to remember to pray for them. When I pass by your house, when I see you in the credit union or Albertsons, I send up a brief skygram. "When you think of me, pray for me."

Notice also in these verses the focus of Paul's prayer concern. No reference to health problems or job situations or financial needs. There is nothing wrong in praying for these things. Paul probably didn't know about many of the personal situations of the people in that congregation. But there is perhaps something to be learned from the fact that Paul is praying for the overall spiritual growth and development of these Christians. Often we pray for a specific need, which is good. But in addition to that we should work at praying for spiritual growth to come out of difficult situations. We should pray for the kinds of things that we are going to see that Paul prays about in these verses.

In the second part of v. 9 Paul gets to his specific request. He says, "**... asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding.**" It is likely that the false teachers at Colossae were telling people in the church that Epaphras got them off to a good start. It was good that he introduced them to Jesus and started them on the basics of the spiritual life. But if they wanted to

know the deeper truths of life, they had to start listening to them. They had the real inside scoop.

This is what happens with so many of the cults. They prey on people who have some kind of Christian involvement. "We believe the Bible, too. But if you really want to know God and His will, you have to listen to this additional information that I have."

Paul perhaps has that kind of false claim in mind as he says that he is praying for the Colossian Christians to be filled with the knowledge of God's will. (PROJECTOR ON---GNOSIS) The normal word in Greek for knowledge is *gnosis*. Here he uses the word *epignosis*, which means "thorough and complete knowledge." Paul says that he wants the Christians at Colossae to be filled with the real stuff, the full and complete knowledge.

This knowledge relates to God's will. It involves wisdom and understanding that comes from God's Spirit. It is knowledge that is practical. It leads to wise choices and decisions. It is not just head knowledge. (PROJECTOR OFF)

This knowledge focuses on God's will. Christians often think of God's will as some kind of secret mystical plan that He has for each of our individual lives that we are responsible to somehow figure out. We are supposed to figure out this mystical will so that we can know what school we should go to, whom we should marry, whether we should accept a particular dinner invitation, and even what clothes we should put on this morning.

The Bible uses the term "God's will" in a couple of different ways. It sometimes speaks of what theologians call God's decretive will. This is God's sovereign will, His decrees, that involves His master plan for all that comes to pass in our world. (PROJECTOR ON-- EPHESIANS 1:11) In Ephesians #1 v. 11 we read, "...**[God] works all things according to the counsel of His will...**" This is God's decretive will. It relates to His sovereignty. If God is truly sovereign, then everything that happens, the good and the bad, must be part of His plan, His decrees.

The Bible also speaks of God's preceptive will. This is the revelation of God's precepts and laws and principles. (PROJECTOR OFF) It includes the Ten Commandments and the instructions of Jesus and the "one anothers" of the Apostle Paul. In 1 Timothy #2 v. 3 the Apostle Paul wrote, "...**God wills all men to be saved...**" This is not God's decretive will. If that were the case, there would be no unbelievers, and no one would end up in hell. Other Scriptures talk about many people who refuse to come to faith in Jesus and fall under His eternal judgment. So this is an example of God's preceptive will.

It is to this preceptive will that we are accountable. It is this aspect of God's will that is in view here in v. 9 of our passage. Paul relates this will of God to spiritual wisdom and understanding. It has to do with making wise choices and being a discerning person. According to v. 10 this will has to do with knowledge that is necessary to live in a

manner that is pleasing to God. It has to do with the information that we have available about what pleases God.

The Colossian Christians did not yet have the completed New Testament available to them. But they did have the Old Testament. They had teaching from Epaphras. They may have had written or oral teaching from other apostles.

We have the New Testament which gives us additional information about God's will which the Colossian Christians did not have. The Bible tells us about God's character and plan for mankind. It tells us about what pleases Him. If we want to please God, we have to know God's will. If we want to know God's will, we have to read and study the Bible.

Fred Smith was a Southern Baptist layman, writer, businessman and motivational speaker. He makes reference to the insight of a godly French archbishop who lived in the 1600s by the name of Fenelon. He writes, **"For years younger people have asked me how they could know God's plan for their life. While reading Fenelon and other saints, I find they are not concerned with that question. Their concern is not with the plan but with the Presence. When we have a guide, we don't need a map. Fenelon said: 'Put aside your self-interest and simply let God's will unfold around you. Everything he does for you is for your good. Worship him without having to know and see everything. Continue doing the good things that you do... ..live in the present moment and God will give you all the grace you need. Live your daily life out in the presence of God. He will give you all that you need. God's glory and his purpose are the end of all things. You will find happiness and salvation there but not as an end in itself. It is all for God.'"** ("Glimpses," Christian History Institute, Issue #108)

II.

How can we please God? If we love someone, we want to find out about that person. We will become interested in his or her likes and dislikes, about his or her personality. So it is with God. We can learn about Him from the Bible. From that we can find out about His will and what pleases Him. We can learn about His character, about His likes and dislikes. We can learn about His plan for mankind. We can read about His laws and principles.

The second major way in which we can please God is to WALK IN A WORTHY MANNER. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. WALK IN A WORTHY MANNER.) The first part of v. 10 says, **"...walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him..."** Literally the text says, **"...so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing..."** We are to live in a way that is appropriate for one who calls Jesus "Lord." We are to live in a way that seeks to please Him.

In classical Greek the word "pleasing" had a bad connotation. One Greek linguist says it referred to **"a cringing and subservient habit, ready to do anything to please a patron; not only to meet but to anticipate his most trivial wishes."**

When we are dealing with behavior directed toward the sovereign God of the universe, the term takes on a different connotation. In 2 Corinthians #5 vv. 9 & 10 (PROJECTOR ON--- 2 CORINTHIANS 5:9) Paul wrote, **“So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. (2 CORINTHIANS 5:10) For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.”**

Much of Greek philosophy, which appeared to have a major influence in Colossae, had a view of knowledge and education that is similar to the prevailing attitude in our society. (PROJECTOR OFF) The goal of education from the perspective of a large segment of our society is to acquire a lot of head knowledge. The point of it is to get good grades, develop academic skills, do well on tests, and get a good degree. That way we can end up some day with a good job. Today it is also important to be “woke,” to be politically correct.

The traditional Jewish view of education, which is more reflective of the Biblical view, is that the acquisition of knowledge should change the way that we live. Yes, the Jews said, one should acquire knowledge to learn a vocation. But the point of education is to live a more skillful and godly life. That is what Paul is saying here.

In the rest of the passage he uses four participles, four verb forms of the same type, to describe four things that should characterize this worthy walk that will be pleasing to God.

A.

The first characteristic of a worthy walk is that a Christian should BEAR FRUIT IN EVERY GOOD WORK. (II. WALK... A. BEAR FRUIT IN ...)The second part of v. 10 speaks of **“...bearing fruit in every good work...”** Some people who think that they are Christians get the order mixed up. They think that in order to be a Christian one has to do good works. Living rightly qualifies a person to get into heaven.

But what Paul indicates here is that good works are not the roots of the Christian life. They are the fruit. Good works that are pleasing to God are what the Christian life produces. The Christian life is the result of trusting in Jesus. A life that continues to reflect that trust produces good works. (PROJECTOR ON--- EPHESIANS 2:8) Ephesians #2 vv. 8-10 tell us, **“For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. (EPHESIANS 2:10) For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”** An understanding of what God has done for us and who we are in Christ should produce good works.

Jesus Himself made a similar point, which is recorded in John’s Gospel in #15 v. 5 (JOHN 15:5): **“I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in**

him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”

Dependence upon the vine, Jesus, is bound to produce good fruit.

Syracuse University Public Administration Professor Arthur Brooks wrote a book several years ago entitled *Who Really Cares: The Surprising Truth About Compassionate Conservatism* (2006). He found that committed Christians give four times more money yearly than their secular counterparts. (PROJECTOR OFF) Much of that goes to churches, but they also give more to secular charities than do secularists. They donate twice as much blood, are more compassionate toward strangers, and give more to help the poor. They also volunteer twice as often to help in charitable causes than do their secular counterparts. When there are national disasters, who shows up on the scene? Is it members of the American Atheists or the American Humanist Association? Typically, besides FEMA, it is Christian groups. Christians who walk in a worthy manner will bear fruit. They will do good works.

We are always happy to have more volunteers around our church. We are on the lookout for volunteers for Vacation Bible School, children’s church, Good News Clubs, youth ministry, and prison ministry. But we are also happy to see people from our congregation volunteer in community groups like the Senior Center, Lend-A-Hand, and Emergency Aid.

B.

The first thing that characterizes a worthy walk is bearing fruit. The second thing which Christians should do is GROW IN KNOWLEDGE OF GOD. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. A. B. GROW IN KNOWLEDGE OF GOD) The last part of v. 10 speaks of this. Paul makes reference to “**...increasing in the knowledge of God...**” This is quite similar to what we said was Paul’s first major point in how we can please God: knowing God’s will.

His inclusion of knowledge of God here in connection with walking in a worthy manner reflects the fact that some knowledge only comes as the result of doing. There are a lot of things that young people can learn about driving a car from reading a driver’s manual. But some of the knowledge only comes from the actual experience of driving the car.

So it is in the Christian life. There are some things that we learn about God only from the personal experience of trusting Him in difficult situations. As we experience challenges in life and trust in God in the midst of them, we begin to see how God provides for us, and we grow in our knowledge of Him and how He operates.

C.

The third characteristic of walking in a worthy manner is described in v. 11. Christians are to BE STRENGTHENED BY GOD’S POWER. (II. A. B. C. BE STRENGTHENED...) Paul speaks of “**being strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might...**” Where do we get this power? Not from ourselves, but from God.

In Ephesians #1 (PROJECTOR ON--- EPHESIANS 1:18) the Apostle Paul prayed for the Christians in the city of Ephesus: “[**I pray that**] **the eyes if your heart [may be]**

enlightened that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, (EPHESIANS 1:19-20A) and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ..." The power to live this worthy walk comes from trusting in God.

How is this power to be used? (PROJECTOR OFF) For performing miracles, for pulling off signs and wonders? Paul in v. 11 of our passage has something else in mind. He says that it is for the attaining of **"all endurance and patience."**

The word for "endurance" in Greek literally means "to remain under." It has the idea of enduring difficult situations. One scholar says that it is **"the kind of perseverance that enables one to hold a position already taken in battle against enemy attacks."** That was the kind of endurance that Londoners displayed in 1940 when they endured daily bombings from the Germans.

(PROJECTOR ON--- CHURCHILL) Prime Minister Winston Churchill reflected on this kind of perseverance when he returned to speak at the prep school from which he had graduated many years earlier. In late October of 1941 circumstances for the British looked very doubtful. Churchill gave a brief four minute speech to the students at Harrow. At the climax he told them, **"Never give in. Never give in. Never, never, never, never--- in nothing, great or small, large or petty--- never give in, except to convictions of honor and good sense. Never yield to force. Never yield to the apparently overwhelming might of the enemy."** It is that kind of steadfastness that we need when we are under spiritual or physical attack. (PROJECTOR OFF) We need strength from God to continue to do what is right.

The word in our text for "patience" means "long-suffering." Endurance relates to situations. Patience relates to dealing with people whom we find to be difficult. It evidences itself in slowness to anger and a refusal to retaliate. (PROJECTOR ON--- JAMES 1:19-20) James said in #1 of his book, **"Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God."** When we fail to endure, we become despairing. We lose heart. We become discouraged. When we lose patience, we become angry and revengeful.

In the realm of education there has been study in recent years in what is referred to by the scholars as "resilience". A researcher by the name of Al Siebert (THE SURVIVOR PERSONALITY), who wrote a book entitled *The Survivor Personality*, says, **"The people who are most resilient have a learning reaction, not a victim reaction, to bad events. It's distressing, they don't like it, but the question is, 'Do they have a learning/coping reaction or a victim/blaming reaction?'"**

In our culture today there is a certain focus that is placed upon victimhood. There is definitely a place for speaking up when we are victims of abuse of various kinds. But it is unhealthy to continue to live as victims. How do we respond to difficult situations and

to difficult people? The apostle says that we have divine power available that will help us to be learners/copers rather than victims/blamers.

D.

Walking in a worthy manner is to be accompanied by fruit bearing, growth in knowledge and strengthening by God's power that enables us to endure and be patient. We are also to GIVE THANKS WITH JOY. (II. A. B. C. D. GIVE THANKS WITH JOY.) That is the subject of vv. 12-14. The prepositional phrase "with joy" at the end of v. 11 should be understood as applying to giving thanks. For each of the four participles in these verses is modified by a prepositional phrase. "With joy" relates to giving thanks.

Thus it is that Paul says that a worthy walk is to involve "**giving thanks to the Father with joy...**" Four other times in this little letter Paul encourages his readers to work at giving thanks. The theme of this book, remember, is that Jesus Christ is sovereign. If He is sovereign over all of our circumstances, we should be able to give thanks, because we believe that God is going to accomplish good even in the toughest situations. Marge, from our congregation, has recently been placed on hospice care. She keeps telling me how blessed she is. That is a demonstration of this kind of worthy walk, of giving thanks with joy.

William Temple, an Anglican church leader in the early 1900s, writes, "**It is probable that in most of us the spiritual life is impoverished and stunted because we give so little place to gratitude. It is more important to thank God for blessings received than to pray for them beforehand. For that forward-looking prayer, though right as an expression of dependence upon God, is still self-centered in part, at least, of its interest; there is something we hope to gain by our prayer. But the backward-looking act of thanksgiving is quite free from this. In itself it is quite selfless. Thus it is akin to love.**"

If we have trouble thinking of things for which to be thankful, Paul proceeds to list some. He says first in v. 12 that the Father "**has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light....**" We have a taste of that inheritance now. We have the promise of an abundant life in the present. We have security. We can enjoy forgiveness of sins. We can appreciate present membership in the family of God. But the real enjoyment of our inheritance is yet future.

In v. 13 we have another reason to be thankful. Paul reminds us that "**He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son...**" A strong king in the Ancient Near East could transfer whole groups of people from his conquered lands and move them to another region of his empire. The Assyrians did that with many of the Jews when they conquered most of Israel in the eighth century BC. The ancient historian Josephus uses this Greek word from our passage for "transferred" to describe what one of these Assyrian kings did to some of the Jews. Earlier in Israel's history God delivered His people from the domain of darkness in Egypt.

This is what God has done for us Christians. He has transferred us from the realm of sin and darkness and placed us into the kingdom of Christ. We now work for Jesus, and He looks out for us.

Then finally from v. 14 we can be thankful for **“redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”** Redemption involves the payment of a price to get something. God was out to rescue us. He was seeking to free us from the effects and penalty of sin. God’s holy character required that man’s sin be paid for by the penalty of death. Fortunately for us, the God-man Jesus was a substitute sufficient to pay the price for that sin. The death of Christ on the cross was sufficient to satisfy God’s righteous anger against sin. It produced our redemption. It resulted in the forgiveness of sins. When we receive this gift by faith, we are declared righteous. We are forgiven. We are freed. That is reason for thanksgiving.

Sometimes life seems difficult. It seems filled with cancer diagnoses and death and isolation from pandemics and hard work and disappointments and failures. But if we are truly Christians, we always have good reasons to be thankful. We have the forgiveness of sins; we are part of a heavenly kingdom; and we have an inheritance waiting for us in heaven. We will be able to enjoy that inheritance for ever and ever and ever and ever.

So how can we please God? We can please Him by knowing Him and living a life that is pleasing in His sight.

Some time ago I read about a woman whose living room was set up as a shrine to Elvis Presley. When a person enters the room, Elvis music automatically comes on. There are pictures and posters of him. There are various kinds of Elvis memorabilia scattered around the room. It is obvious that this woman is attached to Elvis Presley.

When people get to know us, when they visit our home, when they get acquainted with us at work, to what do they think that we are attached? Is the thing that stands out to them that we are into conservative politics? That we are attached to a sports team? That we are successful businessmen? That we are into a particular kind of education? Or is the thing that will stand out to them that we are attached to Jesus Christ? May God help us to understand who He really is and to live in a manner worthy of the God who loved us and sent His Son to die for us.