

Pastor Don Nelson

Sermon: October 8, 2017
Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“SO THAT”
Colossians 1:9b-14

{II Pet 3:18} Congratulations, Emily! Over the past two years you have acquired loads of information, honed your Bible study skills, and sharpened your curiosity. Even better, you have “[grown] **in the grace and the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.**”

I am confident that today’s Rite of Confirmation does not mark the end of your Christian scholarship. You will continue to learn from Scripture and other reliable sources.

? But why? For what purpose? To what end?

Frankly, I do not want you to devote yourself to acquiring biblical, theological, and church historical knowledge, if it makes you “Christian” but not *Christ-like*.

{I Co 8:1} I do not want you to devote yourself to it, if it puffs you up instead of *building up* you and others.

{Mt 7:41} I do not want you to devote yourself to it, if it makes you *think you* know the *Lord*, when all the while *he* does not know *you*.

☑ When I was your age I knew a lot of facts about the Bible and church teachings, but that did not draw me into intimate union with God. It did not ignite whole-hearted love for him, nor did it equip me to love others.

To the contrary, it *inhibited* faith and discipleship. It made me *less* like Jesus. It drove me *away* from God and alienated me from others.

Do not misunderstand! I am not advising my daughter to quit the quest for biblical, theological, and church historical knowledge. Ignorance is not bliss!

{Php 2:16; Jn 8:32} Emily, I urge you to “**hold firmly to the word of life.**” It is my desire and prayer for you to “**know the truth**” with increasing clarity, breadth, depth, and fullness.

All the same, such knowledge is not enough. Not even if you act on it by praying the Sinner’s Prayer, by rededicating your life dozens of times, by attending worship, Sunday school, youth group and parachurch ministries, by serving in the church, and by going on mission trips, as I did when I was your age.

Hence, I exhort you: read, study, and meditate upon Scripture. Explore Christian theology and history. Build your knowledge. And as you do, frequently ask: But why? For what purpose? To what end?

☐ Please turn with me to Colossians 1:9b-14. This text holds some of the answers.

■ In verse 9b the apostle Paul writes: “**We continually ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will.**”

The petition is for God to fill the Christ Followers in Colossae not with knowledge in general, or even of the Bible, but “**with the knowledge of his will.**”

☆ Will is the capacity for definite action to attain particular objectives. It follows that this knowledge is not narrowly conceptual; it is practical.

■ In addition, Paul requests that they will be filled “**through all the wisdom and understanding *that the Spirit*” (the Holy Spirit) “*gives.*”**

☆ The takeaway from this is that knowledge of God’s will is found in relationship with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We become aware of it as we interact with him.

This is a good start, but it does not answer our question, “Why?” Let’s move father into the text.

■ What are the first two words of verse 10? “**So that.**”

■ Verse 11 starts with “**being strengthened.**” Later in the verse Paul reuses the phrase, “**so that.**” “**So that.**” Or we could say: “**So as to,**” “**with the intention of,**” “**with the aim of,**” **in order to.**”

“**So that**” inevitably leads into a purpose statement. It signals that what follows reveals the *why*.

Why do Paul and his team “**ask God to fill**” his readers “**with the knowledge of his will**”? They have two imperative goals in mind.

↗ The first paramount goal is recorded early in verse 10: “**so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and [consequently,] please him in every way”.**

❓ But what kind of life is “**worthy of the Lord**”? How can we please him?

■ The apostle fleshes this out in the rest of verse 10 and the beginning of verse 11:

[a] **bearing fruit in every good work,**

[b] **growing in the knowledge of God,**

[and c] ¹¹ **being strengthened with all power**

according to his glorious might.

① As for “**bearing fruit,**” in Galatians 5:22-23 we discover that “**the fruit of the Spirit is αγαπη [agapē] love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.**”

☆ {Gal 5:24} There is nothing random about this list; it is a cohesive expression of self-denial. As Paul explains in the next verse, “**Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the sinful nature.**”

☆ Accordingly, these qualities come alive in specific words and deeds. They do not exist apart from actual conduct. So, although Paul presents them as nouns, it is valid and helpful to think of them as verbs.

② As for “**growing in the knowledge of God**”:

☆ Intellectual study about the Godhead is excellent, but it is secondary to direct interaction with Jesus in worship, prayer, obedience, ministry, and mission.

{Jn 14:6-7; Ro 6:4-5} Messiah declares: “**If you really know me, you will know my Father.**” When do we know him best? As we participate with him in his sacrifice. For “**we were... buried with him through baptism**” and “**we have been united with him in**” his “**death.**”

③ As for “**being strengthened with all power,**” let us tread very carefully.

When we hear the word “**power,**” we are quick to take a worldly point of view. Speaking for myself, I naturally think of it as the exercise of strength to

control systems (for example, the media, the government, the economy), and other human beings.

📖 The New Testament conception of power is entirely different. It is the exercise of love to serve others – humbly, considerately, generously, inclusively, sacrificially. The only kind of control operative in this is *self*-control.

Do you think this is crazy? If so, Jesus was crazy. Whenever he was tempted to use strength for control, he chose love in service instead. Every single time.

Does this still sound crazy? Then Paul was crazy. He lived by the law of love (Romans 13:8) and he delighted in his weakness “**For,**” he said, “**when I am weak, then I am strong**” (II Corinthians 12:10).

{II Tim 3:16} Do you still think it’s crazy? Then all the New Testament authors were, even though their writings are “**God-breathed**” and “**useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.**”

{Goggin and Strobel} “**Knowledge of God’s will**” strengthens us “**with all power**” to follow the Jesus Way. That is, to exercise love in service to others.

“**Bearing fruit, growing in the knowledge of God, and being strengthened with all power**” comes together in a cruciform life, a cross-shaped life. This is how to “**live a life worthy of the Lord and [thereby] please him in every way.**”

? Is my knowledge fulfilling this purpose? Is it achieving this goal? Let us often ask this!

↗ The second paramount goal is in verses 11b-12: “**so that you may [a] have great endurance and**

patience, ¹² **and [b, consequently] giving joyful thanks to the Father ...**”

? Why do we need “**great endurance and patience**”? Because

- ☹ Cancer, kidney stones, diabetes, skin infections;
- ☹ Autoimmune disorders and degenerative diseases and chronic pain;
- ☹ Depression, anxiety, PTSD, mental illnesses;
- ☹ Aging;
- ☹ Minor ailments that grind us down;
- ☹ Stroke and dementia and Alzheimer’s disease;
- ☹ Colliding cars, sinking boats, and freak accidents;
- ☹ Fires, floods, tornadoes, hurricanes, earthquakes;
- ☹ Failure and frustration and empty success;
- ☹ Hunger, homelessness, poverty;
- ☹ Abundance and creature comforts and wealth;
- ☹ Shallowness, ignorance; false judgment;
- ☹ Indifference and, alternately, misguided zeal;
- ☹ Misunderstanding, rejection, loneliness;
- ☹ Conflict and violence and warfare;
- ☹ Above all, death.

Irritants and hardships tempt us to wallow in despair, or burn with rage, or deny the truth of suffering. All these options are incompatible with the Gospel and discipleship. For the Christ Follower “**great endurance and patience**” are not optional; they are obligatory.

☆ {Rom 15:4; II Co 1:5} Knowledge gained through the Word in relation to God is essential in this. Regarding *knowledge*, Scripture was **“written to teach us, so that through the endurance [it teaches] and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.”** Regarding *relationship*, **“our comfort abounds through Christ” “as we share abundantly in the sufferings of Christ.”**

{I Th 5:16-18} Knowledge and shared experience with Messiah do not shield us from trials. They do enable us to **“Rejoice always”** and **“give thanks in all circumstances”** which **“is God’s will for [us].”**

{I Pet 1:6, 8} Pain and suffering make us sad, uncertain, and angry. Yet we receive **“inexpressible and glorious joy”** in communion with Christ Jesus even as we **“suffer grief in all kinds of trials.”**

■ What is more, when by his power we endure and are patient, it is a sure sign (Colossians 1:12) that **“the Father ... has qualified [us] to share in the inheritance of his people in the kingdom of light.”**

■ That is to say, it is concrete evidence, verses 13-14, that **“he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”** What an amazing gift! It is always right to give thanks for this, is it not? Amen?!

Not only does exerting **“great endurance and patience”** facilitate our growth in hardship and our

resistance to temptation, it has the power to rouse us to **“[give] joyful thanks to the Father”** even though our anguish is real.

‽ Is my knowledge fulfilling this purpose? Is it achieving this goal? Let us often ask this!

Emily, today’s Rite of Confirmation does not mark the end of your Christian scholarship. You will continue to learn from Scripture and other reliable sources.

‽ But why? For what purpose? To what end?

This is my earnest prayer: that God will

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 ... giving joyful thanks to the Father.

And not only you, but each and every one of us.

Colossians is the Word of the Lord.