

New Now

1. A New Priority

January 8, 2023

Colossians 1:9-14

For this reason, 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, ¹⁰ 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, ¹¹ being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience, ¹² 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. ¹³ For 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.

Welcome to the first week of our new message series “New Now.”

There is something about a new year that makes me feel hopeful. 2023 is a year I’ve never lived before. I don’t know all that is going to happen over the next 12 months, but I have some hopes.

Some of us here today might hope that this year will be a lot like last year – because we had a good year. Others of us hope that this year will be much different than last year, because last year wasn’t a good one for us.

But here at the start of 2023, we hope it will be a good year. When we come to December 31, 2023, we want to look back and say it’s been a good one.

Let me ask you: How will you determine whether it’s been good or not?

- For basketball players, it’s a good year when they play well and the team wins.
- For a stock broker a good year is when the markets are up and to the right.
- For a student it might mean getting accepted in their first choice for college.

But life is not so simple. A basketball player can win a championship, but get injured and hooked on opioids; so, was it a good year or a bad one? A student can get into their dream school but then struggle to keep their grades up or to fit in; so, is that a good year?

Colossians 1 tells us how we can have a good year in 2023 – no matter what happens. The book of Colossians is a letter written by the Apostle Paul to Christ-followers in Colossae, which was a small city of in the western part of modern-day Turkey. Paul did not plant the church and had not visited Colossae, but he heard about those believers from others who knew them, and **he prayed for the Colossians.**

He didn't pray that God would keep them safe or prosper them financially. He didn't pray that they would be comfortable or secure – though all of those things are good. Here's what Paul prayed in **Colossians 1:9**:

*We continually ask God to 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:*

“A life worthy of the Lord and please him;” Paul prayed that the Colossians would make God proud! Over the last couple of weeks, I have prayed this prayer for you. I printed it out and put it in my journal. I'm praying our lives can be worthy of the Lord and please him.

We can make God proud. In fact, you may have already pleased God today! He can point to you and tell others in heaven, “Look at my son!” Or “That's my daughter!” This year will be a good one when that happens.

When we start to follow Christ, he gives us a new priority in life: that is, pleasing him. As we grow spiritually mature, our main priority shifts; it is not to please ourselves. We can have a good year even if we don't hit our goals or fulfill our dreams. As long as God is pleased with us, it will be a good year.

We don't demand that God make us happy, though Jesus said that following him will lead to an abundant life – that is a by-product, not the main point. Also, as we grow spiritually, our goal it is not to please other people. 1 Thessalonians 2:4 says,

We are not trying to please people but God, who tests our hearts.

It can be a good year, even if others are annoyed with you or write you off. God didn't make you to be what your parents want you to be, what your girlfriend or boyfriend wants you to be, what your spouse wants you to be, or what your boss or your friends want you to be. God made you to be *you*. 2023 can be a good year because You can please God.

Some of us would like to please God, we're just not sure that we can. There are all those commands in the Bible, surely we're not living up to all of them. Take a moment: imagine God is looking at you right now. If you were to draw a picture of God, what expression is on his face?

- Is he angry?
- Is he smiling at us?
- Is he disappointed?

You can live a life that makes God proud!

How do we please God? What will make God happy? There have been times people have got confused about that.

In the Middle Ages some monks actually thought it would please God if they whipped themselves bloody. They thought God would be pleased if they were willing to hurt themselves as penance for their sins, and that they would be more holy if they trashed their bodies. (Monks don't do that now.) Maybe they misunderstood what Jesus meant when he said "Take up your cross and follow me",

In the Middle Ages, some Christians thought God would be pleased if they went on Crusades and executed heretics. But the Bible doesn't say to do that. In fact, Jesus said the opposite. They misunderstood what Jesus was telling them.

Today we can please God when we live to make an eternal difference as it says in verse 10:

*so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way:
bearing fruit in every good work,*

Fruit comes from the life that flows from the roots of a plant. When we are connected to Jesus, what we do will make a difference not just here on earth, but also in eternity. We won't waste our lives, we invest them.

Wasting money means to use our money on what doesn't last or help us. When we buy a cheap toy for the kids that immediately breaks, that's a waste of money. We get nothing in return. When we overpay for an item, it is waste of money. But when we invest our money, it pays off in the long run. Money we invest doesn't disappear, it grows over time. We have more.

For example, if 20-year old Sarah invested \$1,000 today and didn't touch it until she retired at age 70, her money could increase by 32 times — meaning she could end up with around \$32,000. (This assumes a growth rate historical growth rate in stocks.) Now, if Sarah were to invest that \$1,000 at age 20 *and* contribute \$83 a month until retirement, then by age 70, she'd have \$465,000.¹ That's the power of investing! It's easy to spend \$83/month on specialty coffees, but that would be a waste in the long run compared to the return she could get by investing that.

We can invest our lives too. We please God when we invest our time so that we bear fruit and not waste it. Recently I looked at the screen time counter and was sobered by how much time I spent on my phone. It has crept up over time ever since the pandemic.

I realized that I looked at it during the cracks in my day, a few minutes here, a few minutes there. Then in the evenings or any time I was bored... and the minutes added up. I was embarrassed that I wasted way too much time scrolling social media. Phones are designed to be addicting to our brains, making us crave the next hit or new screen.

¹ <https://hermoney.com/invest/retirement/these-two-examples-illustrate-the-magic-of-compound-interest/>

Tech Jury reports that the average American spends 5.4 hours per day on their phone – that’s nearly 38 hours per week – that’s a second full-time job! That’s 246 workdays per year. What are we doing with all that time?

Social media made up nearly 2.5 hours per day. That’s 17.5 hours per week. And what do we get in return? Does it build us up and make us better people? Add TV watching into that mix, and we spend a lot of our lives in front of a screen. What do we have to show for it in the end? Most of it is wasted time – and our time is our life. That’s why we need to pray for each other to be able to bear fruit in every good work.

What if we were to invest that time in becoming the people God has called us to be? Fruitful Time not all about working or doing massive work. 1 Corinthians 13 says, “*Whatever you do in love.*” Using your gifts and serving is a way to do that

Also, we please God when we get to know God more deeply. Verse 10 says,

so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way...growing in the knowledge of God,

It pleases God not just that we know ABOUT God, but that we KNOW God personally. Just like you enjoy being around your friends, God enjoys being with us. He came to earth so that he could knock down the sin barrier that keeps us apart. Jesus said, in John 14:3

And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.

When we get to know God, it sparks in us a hunger to know him more, and the cycle continues. When we get to know God, we get to know what he likes and doesn’t like.

Linda and I have known each other over 4 decades now. I know what makes her happy and what doesn’t. But when we first met, I didn’t.

When Linda and I were first dating, I took her to a Pirate game. What I didn’t know was that she hated baseball. But she didn’t tell me that when I suggested we go to a game. So, not only did I take her to a game, it was a double header! I didn’t know! She never complained, but as I got to know her, I got to know what she liked better. (Though she still doesn’t love baseball out of self-defense she’s grown to appreciate it.)

The more we get to know God, the more we know what pleases him. We get to know God by spending time with him in the scripture and prayer, by investing a little of that screen time in reading the Bible and praying about our lives. We get to know him by our life experiences with him, and that makes him happy.

Ask for power to go the distance with Jesus. In verse 11, finally Paul prays,

being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience,

Pastor Patil lives and ministers in India. Each day he leaves his house quietly and never in a group. He jumps on a small Honda motorbike and putters past little towns and fields, with his Bible tucked inside his jacket. He constantly checks his mirrors to make sure he is not being followed.

Hindu extremists have warned Pastor Patil that they will kill him if they catch him preaching. So last year he shut down his Living Hope Pentecostal Church, which used to have 400 members. But he didn't give up. He shifted to small services in secret, usually at night.

A journalist went with him one night to see what was happening. Pastor Patil drove to a secret prayer session in an unmarked farmhouse. He quickly stepped inside. On a dusty carpet that smelled like sheep, two dozen church members waited for him. Most were lower-caste farmers. When a dog barked outside, one woman whipped around and whispered, "What's that?"

Pastor Patil reassured the woman that God was watching over them. He opened his weathered, Hindi-language Bible and read Luke 21, "They will seize you and persecute you," he read, voice trembling. "They will put some of you to death. Everyone will hate you because of me." Pastor Patil says, "You get this energy just thinking about his name." Can you just imagine how proud God is of Pastor Paul for not giving up? He showed "great endurance and patience."

That's what Paul prayed for the Colossians, and that's what will make God proud of us, too. That we don't give up following him, growing in him, loving him. By the power of the Spirit, we can do that!

Are you following Jesus more closely today than last year at this time? Is your passion for Jesus growing or declining? If we ask him, the Holy Spirit can reignite our hearts when they grow cold. He can restore our first love. He can give us the ability to persevere as followers.

If we are journeying alone, we will easily give up. We need others around us. That's why you need a Life Group. We each need people around us to encourage us, to be an example, and to pray for us. Iron sharpens iron.

This can be a great year because we can please God. If we are followers of Jesus, we can come to the end of this year, and the end of our lives, and hear "Well done, good and faithful servant."

If the idea of pleasing God doesn't move you, doesn't interest you, then it could be that you are disconnected from God – because the Spirit of God draws us to Jesus and makes us want more of him.

So today, take this chance to ask God for a new heart. Pray Paul's prayer over yourself and ask him to redirect your focus toward what will make you want to invest in true life. He is merciful and will answer.