



The Fuel for Spiritual Fruit

Colossians 1:1-14



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Main point: Spiritual growth and fruitfulness comes from God, and from an ever-increasing knowledge of the God who has revealed Himself in the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Introduction:

Try this exercise. Write down three prayer requests—the first that come to your mind.

What categories do your three requests fall under? Are they prayers regarding health, salvation for loved ones, provision, relationships, etc.? Certainly, these are good, right, and biblical things for us to be praying about. But, there are some other things that the Apostles prayed about a lot, that many of us tend to forget—namely, prayer for spiritual growth and fruitfulness in our lives, and in the lives of others. How often do we pray for fruitfulness in the lives of others?

In our text today, we will see how concerned Paul was that His brothers and sisters in Christ grow and bear fruit; and what we learn is that **spiritual growth and fruitfulness comes from God, and from an ever-increasing knowledge of the God who has revealed Himself in the Gospel of Jesus Christ**.

Read Colossians 1:1-14.

Paul wrote the letter to The Church at Colossae from prison, probably in Rome. He was suffering persecution for preaching Christ, and yet, his main concern was not for himself nor his physical well-being, but for the growth of other Christians—even those he had not personally met. According to this letter, Paul had never

been to The Church at Colossae. This church and others in nearby cities (i.e., Laodicea and Hierapolis) in Phrygia, Asia Minor, seem to have been planted by a convert of Paul's named Epaphras. But Paul was as concerned for these young sheep as he was for those he personally pastored in places like Ephesus.

The purpose of the letter is to combat false teaching that was threatening the young congregation. False teaching about the person of Christ, where true spiritual knowledge is found, and where growth comes from. This was a kind of Jewish-tinged proto-gnosticism which taught that there was a deeper knowledge and spirituality only available to certain people who had visions, kept certain ritual days, or ate certain foods. In short, the Gospel of Jesus Christ was being distorted.

To combat this teaching, Paul labors throughout the letter to show that spiritual growth and fruitfulness in the Christian life cannot happen if the Gospel is distorted, the doctrine of Christ is misunderstood, or the will of God is unknown. So, at the very outset of the letter, Paul sets up His argument about how a Christian is to be a growing and fruitful Christian, in contrast to what the false teachers were saying:

- A. First, by being thankful to God for fruitfulness. (vv.3-8)**
- B. Second, by praying to God for greater fruitfulness. (vv.9-14)**

Exposition:

- A. Be thankful to God for fruitfulness in the lives of others. (vv.3-8)**

Paul wrote many letters to different churches. And he began them in different ways. In Galatians, after a brief greeting, he launches into a harsh rebuke of that church. In Ephesians, he goes straight into a doctrinal praise of the triune God. But by far, the most common way that Paul began his letters was with thanksgiving.

Paul was a thankful person. And he was thankful specifically for the spiritual growth and fruitfulness he saw in the lives of other Christians. And he wanted them to know how thankful he was.

- 1. The object thanksgiving: Whom are we to thank? (v.3)**

Paul wants to make clear at the outset to Whom He is thankful.

³ We give thanks to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ

This is incredibly important when we consider thankfulness in the Christian life. When Paul sees spiritual growth in the lives of others, he does not lavish praise on them. That is usually our first instinct—we give people the credit for their growth and progress in the faith. We are to notice growth in one another, but our thanks, first and foremost, should go to God.

Why? Because growth comes from God. Yes, He works through means, such as preaching, teaching, admonishment, etc.; and it comes from personal self-discipline in the Word and in practicing the truth; but ultimately it is God who is responsible for your growth and my growth.

- **1 Corinthians 3:6-7**—I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth.⁷ So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth.
- **1 Corinthians 15:10**—But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me.

So then, when you see a brother or sister doing well spiritually, be thankful—but be thankful first to God for how He is working in their lives. And when you see yourself growing, be thankful—thankful to God for His grace and power at work in you.

So, Paul expresses the object of His thanksgiving—God—but then quickly moves to explain why he is thankful to God.

2. The reason for thanksgiving: What are we to thank God for? (vv.4-8)

Paul gives two reasons he is thankful to God. He is thankful to God since he heard of:

1. Their faith in Christ (v.4a)
2. Their love for all the saints (v.4b)

This is the kind of thing that caused Paul to rejoice, and it is the kind of thing that we all should rejoice in—faith in Christ and love for the brethren. These are two of the essential marks of true Christianity.

- **1 John 3:23**—This is His commandment, that we believe in the name of His Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, just as He commanded us.

But there is also an important causal relationship between faith in Christ and love for the brethren. It is the faith in Christ that produces love for the brethren. It can't be the other way around. "Faith in Christ" is not just a head knowledge belief that He is the Son of God, the Messiah—the demons believe that.

The *"Westminster Shorter Catechism for Children"* states:

Q. 57. What is it to believe or have faith in Christ?

A. To trust in Christ alone for salvation.

Saving faith in Christ is a trust in Christ alone. And to trust in Christ is to give yourself wholly over to Him in loving obedience. It is to follow Him and obey His commands. And one of His most basic commands is that we love one another. We are to recognize each other as family now—each one purchased with Christ's own blood; no longer strangers and aliens but fellow citizens, fellow members of God's household and family.

So, saving faith in Christ produces godly love for one another. But Paul then moves on to describe the reason for both their faith and the love.

⁵ because of the hope laid up for you in heaven

They are growing in their faith and love because of their hope. And this is not the kind of hope that is merely wishful thinking. This is Biblical hope—hope that is assured because it is promised by God, Himself. It is a hope that is already laid up for them in heaven.

What is this hope they have in heaven? It is the hope that they have heard in the word of truth, which is the Gospel. That is, the hope—the certainty—of salvation and life in Jesus Christ. This message that they heard from this beloved servant of God, Epaphras—that Jesus Christ, the Son of Man and Son of God, has completed the work of redemption through His death, resurrection, and ascension. He died to sin once for all, defeated death through His resurrection, ascended into heaven, and took His seat at the right hand of the Father.

Their hope, and our hope, is eternal life in Christ. And that hope is in heaven, where Christ is, where no one and no power can touch it or take it away. It is this assurance—that our hope is secure in heaven in Christ—which allows us to grow and bear fruit no matter what this life throws at us, or what trials, persecutions, or sufferings we go through here. This is the fruit of the Gospel.

As Paul writes, he says that this faith, love, and hope—this fruit of the Gospel—is not unique to the Colossian Christians. Paul says that what is happening to them, this Gospel fruit, is happening “*in all the world*” (v.6). Wherever the Gospel is preached and takes root, it produces fruit. Wherever the Gospel is constantly proclaimed, it constantly bears fruit in the lives of people.

And whenever and wherever we see this happening we are to give thanks and praise to God who causes the growth. But we should not only give thanks for growth and fruitfulness, we should also do something else: we should pray for even greater fruitfulness.

B. Pray to God for greater fruitfulness in the lives of others. (vv.9-14)

Immediately after Paul gives thanks to God for the fruit of the Gospel in the lives of the Colossian Christians, he prays that God would grant them even greater fruitfulness. He is not content to bask in the good news that other Christians are growing—he wants them grow still more and more. Why? Because he knows if a Christian is not growing, they are in a very vulnerable and dangerous place.

- **2 Peter 1:8**—For if these qualities are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We have seen in several different places that God expects fruit from the Christian (*Matt.7:15-23; 21:18-22; 25:14-46*)—it is not optional. He saved us to bear fruit, therefore, if we are not bearing fruit, what assurance do we have that God is working in us at all? Why should we have any confidence that we have any part of Him?

But a lack of growth, or spiritual stagnation, has another danger—it leaves us vulnerable to false teaching coming from within and without. A spiritually stagnant person is a sitting duck for the enemy. They are like a sheep who is easily fooled by a wolf in camouflage. We must be growing and fruitful Christians or we are easy pickings for the evil one.

And so, Paul prays for them. In fact, he says that he *“does not cease to pray for them.”* This is not a one-time prayer for Paul—he cares for them and goes to God again and again on their behalf with one great request. What is his great request?

1. **The request: knowledge of God’s will (v.9)**

⁹For this reason also, since the day we heard of it, we have not ceased to pray for you and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding

This is what Paul wants for them, and knows that they need, more than anything else: that they would be filled with the knowledge of God’s will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding.

S. Lewis Johnson illustrates this section helpfully as a tree:

- Verse 9—the root
- Verse 10a—the trunk
- Verses 10b-14—the branches

The knowledge of God’s will is the root of the tree.

What is the knowledge of God’s will? This is not a prayer that Christians would understand the secret, decretive will of God. That will that belongs to Him alone, in which He decrees all that has occurred and ever will occur. *“The secret things belong to the LORD” (Deut.29:29)*. Rather, this is a prayer that Christians would be filled with knowing God’s preceptive will—that is, His commanded will. He wants them to know what pleases God, and how to live in a way that glorifies Him.

They know some, yes—they had been taught the Gospel by Epaphras. Yet, Paul longs for them to know more of God, more of His Word, more of the implications of the Gospel, more of all the things God wants us to know. This is what he means by *“all spiritual wisdom and understanding”*—everything that God has revealed to us in His Word is worth knowing, understanding, and applying. That’s why He gave it to us, and every Christian is to spend their whole lives being filled with the knowledge of God’s will.

Why? Does Paul want them, and us, to become theological eggheads—filling our minds with knowledge and theology until we can’t fit any more in there? Is this what he means by being *“filled with the knowledge of His will”*? Not at all!

Illustration: Don’t think of “being filled” in the sense of a cup that you fill with water until it overflows. Instead, this kind of “filling” is more like a hot air balloon. Or like a sail being filled with wind; or a car’s tank being filled with gas. This is a filling with a purpose—a filling that causes movement, or progress.

In the same way, the knowledge of God’s will is the fuel for our spiritual growth and fruitfulness.

And we know that because the very next words that Paul writes are, *“so that.”* He prays that they will be filled with the knowledge of God’s will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding *“so that”* something will happen as a result.

2. The results: spiritual growth and fruitfulness (vv.10-14)

A God-pleasing walk (v.10a)

¹⁰ so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects

Paul wants them, and us, to be filled with the knowledge of God's will so that our walk will please God.

This is the trunk of the tree.

In the Bible, a person's "walk" is a reference to your whole way of life. It refers to your character and your actions, which reveal your mind and your heart. Your walk can be pleasing to God or displeasing to Him.

- **Psalm 1:1a**—How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked
- **Psalm 119:1**—How blessed are those whose way is blameless, who walk in the law of the LORD. (*see also Ez.11:20; Hos.14:9*)

So, Paul is saying, and praying, that in order to live a God-pleasing life, you must be filled with the knowledge of His will.

Do you want to grow as a Christian? Of course you do! If you don't, then some serious self-examination needs to happen, and you may very well question your salvation. So, if you want to grow there is no other option; there is only one kind of fuel—that is knowing God's will, knowing His Word, always in the process of learning, understanding, and applying God's Word.

But he is not calling us to a knowledge that is mechanical or legalistic. Truly knowing and understanding God's will means understanding it in the context of the Gospel of God's grace revealed in Jesus Christ. Life is not in the Scriptures—life is in Christ, who is the subject and focal point of all Scripture.

- **John 5:39**—You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; it is these that testify about Me

Are you pursuing the knowledge of God's will in His Word? And in His Word, are you seeking and finding Christ? Because this is how we learn to walk in a God-pleasing manner.

There is no fast-track to spiritual growth. This is how God designed sanctification—it takes discipline, time, prayer, and willingness to apply. And when you do these things humbly depending on God's strength and grace He will begin to fill you with that knowledge of Himself and of His will—which will lead to you walking in a way that pleases Him.

And what does that walk look like? He describes this walk with four participles. It looks like:

- i. Fruitful work (*v.10b*)
- ii. Increasing knowledge of God (*v.10c*)
- iii. Spiritual strength (*v.11*)
- iv. Joyful thanksgiving (*v.12*)

These are the branches of the tree.

i. Fruitful work (*v.10b*)

The first branch is fruitful work. When we are fueled by the knowledge of God's will through His Word, our walk will be characterized by fruitful work.

- ¹⁰ bearing fruit in every good work

This is what God saved us for, isn't it? Good works matter to God. Good works please God. We are not saved by good works; and we don't earn any merit before God by good works; but they do matter because they are what God saved us to do here on earth.

- **Ephesians 2:8-10**—For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; ⁹ not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰ For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them.

And that work can take on hundreds of different forms—worship of God, praying for others, sharing Christ with someone, service in a ministry, sacrificing time to help someone in need, giving toward the work of the kingdom, comforting the hurting, etc.

But notice what Paul says. A worthy walk is not just characterized by doing lots of good works, but by bearing fruit in those works. In other words, the work is motivated by God's Word, and directed by God's Word, so that God is pleased to work through your work to bear much fruit to His glory.

It's what God saved us for, and it's what He expects of us—fruitful work.

ii. Increasing knowledge of God (*v.10c*)

The second branch is an increasing knowledge of God. When we are fueled by the knowledge of God's will through His Word, our walk will be characterized by an increasing knowledge of God.

- ¹⁰ and increasing in the knowledge of God

You might say at this point, "Didn't Paul already establish that?" Yes, he has already brought up the importance of the knowledge of God's will. But here's the important point: we don't get more knowledge of God simply by studying, reading, and listening. All of that is essential, of

course; but what Paul seems to be saying here is that as we grow in our obedience to God's will, we will receive more and more knowledge of God. There is a cycle. As we grow in our knowledge of God's will, we will obey Him; and as we obey God more, He will be pleased to reveal more of Himself to us.

- **John 7:17a**—If anyone is willing to do His will, he will know of the teaching.

You cannot expect to grow in your knowledge of God if you are not willing to work for Him; and you cannot bear fruit in your work, if you do not know His will.

iii. **Spiritual strength (v.11)**

The third branch is spiritual strength. When we are fueled by the knowledge of God's will through His Word, our walk will be characterized by spiritual strength.

- ¹¹ strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience

Where does our strength come from? It doesn't come from us. You may think you're strong, but it won't take long for you to fall flat in your own strength. The trials of life, Satan, and your own flesh will quickly flatten you when you begin to rely on yourself.

We need a divine strength to live, persevere, and bear fruit for God. We need His strength working in us and through us. We need His strength to keep us steadfast and patient. We need His glorious might to stand and bear fruit for His sake.

And how do we get His strength? We get it by knowing His will in His Word. In His Word we see His sovereign power that none can break or even challenge—and that power is available to us. We see His comforting hand on the afflicted—and know He also will comfort us. In Christ, we see His unparalleled love and commitment—and know that He will never leave us nor forsake us (*Heb.13:5*). In Christ, we see perfect patience, strength under control, persevering while suffering, and trust in His Father through the power of the Holy Spirit.

And as we learn more of Him and His will, we are strengthened. Because Christ is in us, we can endure in the face of hardship, pain, and suffering. Because we have been given the Holy Spirit, we can stand against the enemy. Because we are His children, we can be assured of His love, power, and presence.

iv. Joyful thanksgiving (vv.12-14)

The fourth branch is joyful thanksgiving. When we are fueled by the knowledge of God's will through His Word, our walk will be characterized by joyful thanksgiving.

- ¹² joyously giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light. ¹³ For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, ¹⁴ in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

We come full circle from where we started—to thanksgiving.

A Christian growing in the knowledge of God's will is a thankful Christian. Why? Because the more you understand of God's Word, the more you understand of how good, great, holy, loving, and giving He is toward an undeserving sinner like you and me. The more you come to understand what He really did for you, the more thankful you will be. When you understand that He has done for you what you could never do for yourself—He has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light—then you will be a thankful person. When you understand that you were living in the domain of darkness—spiritually dead, blind, and enslaved to sin—and that you were an enemy of God; but that He—out of His sheer love, grace, and mercy—transferred you to the kingdom of His beloved Son, then you cannot not be thankful.

This, then, is the Christian life that Paul prays for, and that we should be praying for ourselves and for others—a fruitful life for God. He expects fruit from His children. And we have to understand that it will only come through a growing knowledge of His will.

So, let's all strive to grow in knowing Him as He has revealed Himself in His Word; as He has revealed Himself in Christ. And as we do so, may God be pleased to work in each one of us, so that we would walk worthily before Him all of our days.

Amen.

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