

How to Please God

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[0 : 0 0] Well, warm welcome this afternoon, this rather cold afternoon, I hope. If you're a regular that you've had a good Christmas and a good New Year, it's lovely to see lots of familiar faces looking up at me.

And a warm welcome too, especially if you're a visitor. It's a real pleasure to have you with us. Now we're going to begin with a prayer in a moment before reading the Bible.

Well, I hope that you get a chance to continue your conversations afterwards. But let's, for a moment, put those out of our minds and come before God.

Dear Lord God, as we come from our busy days, we pray that in the next few minutes you would focus our minds and our hearts on what you have to say to us.

I can say many words up here, but what we want to do is to hear your voice through your word, instructing us, comforting us, and teaching us.

[1 : 1 5] We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. So we're starting a new four-part series today, looking at the book of Colossians and the book of Philemon.

Just little sections of those, the prayers in those books. I'm going to be particularly thinking about the question of how we can grow as Christians in the Christian life.

So if you'd be able to turn with me to the book of Colossians, that's page 983 in the Bibles in front of you. That's page 983 in the book of Colossians.

We're in chapter 1, and I'm going to start reading at verse 3. Chapter 1, verse 3. We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you.

Since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of truth, the gospel, which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing, as it also does among you.

[2 : 4 0] Since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, just as you learned it from Epaphras, our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

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, and 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. Now, I think that every real Christian has somewhere in their heart the desire to grow as a Christian, to be more like Jesus, to live a life filled with more love for God and love for our neighbors.

The trouble is that that very rapidly turns, for a lot of us, to disappointment or discouragement. And if it doesn't, it turns instead to kind of spiritual get-rich-quick schemes where we try and short-circuit the way to growth.

[4 : 2 4] Now, as we look at these prayers in Colossians and Philemon, we get to see the Apostle Paul encouraging the Colossians, Christians who, as you've just heard, loved God and wanted to grow.

They're not a problem church. They're people who really love God and want to grow. And yet have this danger, as chapter 2 will tell us, of deception into false ways that would distract them from

Jesus, precisely because of their hunger to grow.

So we see Paul teach them how to hold on to Jesus and how to grow. And in these prayers, he's setting out his hopes, his aims, his agenda for their lives, for the life of every true Christian.

And we, as we eavesdrop on these really rather passionate prayers, see what a Christian life can be, what it should be, what it ought to be.

We see what it means to grow as a Christian in actually quite simple terms. We see how it happens day to day. Now, today as we look at this, we want to just look at three simple points.

[5 : 31] Firstly, we see what I'm very hesitatingly calling the method of growth. We see the mission or the purpose of Christian growth. And finally, we see a model of Christian growth, what it looks like practically worked out in life.

Now, firstly, the method. Let's be very, very clear here. What we are looking at is not a series of commands. It would be very easy to read this passage and think, these are the things I ought to do. We are looking here at a prayer. There's a lot to do in the passage, perhaps. But it is fundamentally a prayer. It's a heartfelt prayer.

And it's a reminder that all growth as a Christian is rooted in prayer. And not even necessarily in our own prayer. This is Paul praying for others. And we depend on one another, too, for our growth as Christians.

And there's a very, very simple reason for that. The Apostle Paul is talking here about something that is utterly supernatural. It is about a supernatural life. And if we think that this is just about how to be a slightly better person, or if we think we can do this by ourselves, we are completely deceived.

[6 : 47] And dangerously deceived. Therefore, what Paul is talking about is something that is only possible for someone who, as Paul has described of the Colossians, have been supernaturally touched by God already, have come to believe that gospel which has implanted itself in them.

And then still only comes by the power of God working through prayer. The second thing we need to see is that Paul has a very clear mission for us as we grow as Christians.

The goal of the Christian life is to please the Lord Jesus Christ. Now, if you look at verse 10, you'll see that the whole purpose of this is that they may, as he says, have this, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord.

To walk, to live, in other words, in a manner, a way, worthy of the Lord Jesus Christ. Now, that's not worthy in the sense of deserving the Lord Jesus Christ. There is no such thing.

But worthy, as he goes on to say, in the sense of being fully pleasing to Jesus Christ, that he would look and smile at our actions day to day, at the way we live our lives.

[8 : 05] And others would look and say, yes, that is what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. Now, that's rather hard. In fact, I think it's probably supernatural, again, to put it mildly.

And that's, I think, where we often go wrong. The person whose life, I think, has taught me most about holiness, I'm still processing some of those lessons, was a verger, by which I mean a dog's body, at a church.

He was an ex-homeless man who spent most of his life carrying tables and mopping floors. And every so often, he would have a conversation with someone who was on a sort of spiritual up in their life, and they would tell him that to be really holy, hidden in subtext, like me, to be really holy, what you need to do is spend at least a couple of hours a day in this kind of wonderful prayer, just breathing the sort of constant love between the Father and you, like I have.

You want to have this deeper spiritual experience, which will change and turn around your life. And, I hope I'm not discouraging anyone from praying two hours a day, but, this man worked 80 hours a week.

It wasn't too easy. And yet, he was the person whose life breathed the most willing, humble, gracious service to others.

[9 : 33] He didn't just carry tables because it was his job, he carried tables because he loved to serve other people. In Colossians, Paul is very, very keen, that they get their goal absolutely right in terms of their goal for the Christian life.

The Colossians, you see, they were very tempted to do what some of us are to do, which is to make holiness about themselves, about techniques, that make growth as a Christian to be about what I am, what I become, what I do, my spiritual disciplines.

And in the case of the Colossians, if we had time to see through chapter two, we would see that that meant for them strange kinds of mysticism, man-made religion, pride, complicated things for which you need an awful lot of time, an awful lot of energy, probably quite a lot of book learning, which just aren't open to most of us, and which, unfortunately, also only lead to pride.

And so the passage right after our passage, again, if we had time to read it, reorientates the whole of the Colossians worldview. It reminds them, the universe exists for Jesus Christ, the world exists for Jesus Christ, you exist through and for Jesus Christ.

So you want to know what the goal of your life is? Do you want to know, really, what you are to be like? It is so simple. It is to please him, because that is who you are made for. So Paul sweeps away all the complexity that they have in their holy days, their fasts, their mystical experiences and their angel worship, whatever that is, and says, it is just about pleasing him.

[11:19] So on the one hand, it is supernaturally impossible. On the other, it is marvelously simple. You don't have to be a genius, you don't have to be special, you don't have to be clever, you don't even have to be someone with lots of time on your hands.

But you do have to be someone who wants to please him. Thirdly, and this is the main point, Paul gives us what I have tentatively called a model for Christian growth.

I was almost tempted to call it a mechanism, but that obviously gives us the wrong idea of something passive, and it is certainly not passive. It is a picture of how to grow in holiness.

Let's look back to verse 9, the very heart of the prayer. In fact, the really, the fundamental thing, one thing he prays, 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 other words, how do we please him? How do we grow? Well, the first thing is very simple. It's to learn what he wants. That's what he's praying for the Colossians, that they would know what Jesus Christ wants of them.

[12:35] And again, we distort this very easily. Usually, if someone comes asking for pastoral advice on seeking the will of God, it's either about moving house, or getting a job, or perhaps who they should get married to, which at least means I don't need to seek the will of God anymore in my life, because I think I've got those things sorted for the next couple of years.

I suspect a few of you are the same. But Paul is talking about the nitty-gritty. Look how he expands on that in verse 9. In all spiritual wisdom and understanding, wisdom in the Bible is the simplest practical thing of knowing how to live in God's world day to day and moment by moment.

Understanding, spiritual understanding, I think, is the opposite of the world's understandings. There are plenty of people who understand how to get on in life, aren't there, who know how to get ahead. We want spiritual understanding about life.

We want to know and really grasp what Jesus said when he said, the way to become the greatest is to be the servant of all. The way to save your life is to lose it. The way down is the way up.

That utter turning upside down of life, which we have when we see the reality of God's power over the universe and Christ's sacrifice on the cross.

[13:56] So what does Paul want for us? He wants us to know God's will through and through and particularly to know about what his will is in daily life.

It's not rocket science. And most of us probably know where to start. You read your Bible, you pray hard, you listen to sermons, and you think, how does this actually work out in my life?

But of course, you pray hard because it is supernatural. The thing is that really knowing, really getting this kind of thing in your heart, really understanding what God wants, what pleases him, really hungering for that leads then to the next four things.

And you'll see there are four characteristics. In verse 10, he says that we will bear fruit in every good work. In verse 10, he goes on to say we'd also increase in knowledge.

In verse 11, that we will be strengthened. And in verse 12, that we will live a life that's full of thanksgiving. These four characteristics all spring from this kind of knowledge.

[15:11] Now, we'll cover most of that next week. But the critical thing to see this week is that we have a virtuous circle, a little spiral at work here.

Because we've seen that what Paul's praying for is that they know what pleases God, know how to live according to his will. And we'll see here that the result of that is that we bear fruit in every good work and increase in the knowledge of God.

So we do good on the one hand and we increase in knowledge of God on the other. The thing about the knowledge of God is that the more you know God and the more you know about God, as long as it's the right kind of knowing about God, is that you also know more about the will of God and what he wants.

So he's saying, I pray you'll know the will of God, the knowledge of his will. That will result in action and growth in knowing God.

Those two things always go together in the Bible. You act on what you know and you grow in the knowledge of God. You can't separate them. There's no such thing as book knowledge on the one hand and action on the other.

[16:22] They go together. But here, he's saying, you start with a little bit and you get a little bit more. In other words, back to ourselves, we're so tempted by get-rich-quick schemes.

I don't know if you've been following the furor about Bitcoin in the newspapers and all the people so eager to make their millions. Well, we're just the same in the Christian life. And I think the Colossians were the same.

They wanted to short-circuit this by mystical methods or whatever, the latest book, the latest secret. And here he says, come on, do you know something about the will of God?

I pray that you will. Do you know something that he wants you to do? Perhaps, you know, maybe something very small. Maybe you need to smile at someone who's looking a little glum today.

Maybe you need to say sorry to someone who you annoyed this morning.

Maybe you need to just stop yourself when you start grumbling. Or maybe you do need to step all the way up and tell someone about Jesus. You do that. You do that.

[17:25] And you discover more about what he wants you to do next. And you do that. And you discover more. And you do that. And you discover more. And it goes on and on and on.

And the great heights of the Christian life are reached just by little steps. Just as they are in every other area of life.

You know, don't think there's in any area of life where that's not true. Do what you know. Put into practice what you have. Pray for more. It's not complicated. He said. And yet, where does it lead? It leads to a life that pleases the Lord Jesus Christ. So that he can look down and smile on you. And he loves you already.

But life in which he is delighted by you. It's not complicated. It's not far out of reach. It's not something you need heaps of time or money for.

[18:27] Supernatural. But it's very, very simple. Growing as a Christian comes through prayer. It has as its goal pleasing the Lord Jesus Christ. Eyes up on him, not on ourselves.

But it comes as growth when we put into practice what he's already given us and already taught us. Next week, we'll see a little more of a picture of what that can be, what that means, what that looks like, what we might look like when we do that.

When that happens in us. But for now, let's lift our eyes and think, how can I please my Lord Jesus Christ? And ask him for the power to do that, the knowledge to do that.

Let's pray briefly and then we'll sing. Lord Jesus Christ, what we are talking about is supernatural. It is perhaps simple, but we need you to do it in us.

We need that knowledge of your will. and I pray for that. Pray we will all come to see what you want and to do it.

[19:47] In Jesus Christ's name we pray. Amen.