WHAT SPIRITUAL GROWTH LOOKS LIKE

Colossians 1:9-12

By

Steven J. Cole

November 15, 2015

© Steven J. Cole, 2015

To access previous sermons or to subscribe to weekly sermons via email go to Sermons tab: www.fcfonline.org

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture Quotations are from the New American Standard Bible, Updated Edition © The Lockman Foundation
What Spiritual Growth Looks Like
Colossians 1:9-12

One thing I love about kids is their strong desire to grow up. The late pastor Ray Stedman said that once he asked a boy how old he was. Quick as a flash he said, “I’m twelve, going on thirteen, soon be fourteen.” He was eager to grow up.

Every parent has a growth chart somewhere on a wall or closet door, where you measure your kids’ heights every few months. When they see how much they’ve grown, they beam with delight. I remember going to Disneyland as a boy and discovering that I didn’t quite reach the bottom of the sign that gave the height requirement for driving the miniature cars. Wow, was I disappointed! Finally, of course, I reached that goal, but that only whet my appetite to turn 16 so that I could get my driver’s license and drive a real car. I wanted to grow up!

As a parent, it always brings great joy when your kids grow old enough to learn what pleases you and then they do it. “Daddy, I helped Mommy bake your favorite cookies!” “Daddy, I knew you didn’t feel well, so I made you a card!” You know that they’re growing because they want to do things to please you.

Have you ever thought about what spiritual growth looks like? Can you measure it by how often you go to church or by how many ministries you’re involved in or by how much you give? Sometimes those things may reflect spiritual growth, but they aren’t at the heart of it. At the heart of spiritual growth is learning how God wants us to live so that as His children, we can please Him by living that way. In his prayer for these new Colossian believers, Paul shows what spiritual growth looks like:

**Spiritual growth means growing to know how God wants us to live so that we seek to please Him in all things.**

I’m approaching this prayer as a picture of spiritual growth, but don’t miss the fact that it is a prayer. It shows us how Paul prayed for these new believers, most of whom he did not know personally. Along with Paul’s other recorded prayers (Eph. 1:15-23;
3:14-21; Phil. 1:9-11; 1 Thess. 3:9-13; 2 Thess. 1:3-12), we can learn how to pray for our families, our friends, for ourselves, and for other believers. When Paul says here that he and Timothy had “not ceased to pray” for the Colossians, he means that they had often remembered them in their prayers. Use this prayer as a guide for your prayers!

Paul’s prayer here actually begins in verses 3-8, where he thanked God for their faith in Christ Jesus, their love for all the saints, and the hope laid up for them in heaven. Now he tells them his request, that they would be filled with the knowledge of God’s will so that they will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, pleasing Him in every way. Then he lists four things that please the Lord (indicated by four participles in the Greek text): bearing fruit in every good work; increasing in the knowledge of God; being strengthened with God’s power so that we can steadfastly and patiently endure trials; and, joyfully giving thanks to the Father for His great salvation. I’m going to treat this prayer from the perspective of what spiritual growth looks like.

1. **Spiritual growth means growing to know how God wants us to live.**

Colossians 1:9: “For 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 . . . .”

Paul’s prayer that the Colossians would be filled with the knowledge of God’s will does not mean that he wants them to know whether they should take a different job offer or marry a particular person. Rather, he’s asking that they might know God’s moral will as revealed in His Word. “Being filled” with this knowledge is a prayer that they would be controlled by this knowledge so that it would govern every thought, word, and deed. Since God’s moral will is a reflection of His holy character, Paul’s prayer is that these new believers would grow to know God Himself as He has revealed Himself in His Word.

The false teachers who had infiltrated the Colossian church may have been emphasizing how their teachings would bring you fullness of knowledge. To counter this claim, Paul emphasizes the
theme of fullness by repeatedly using the words “all” or “every”: “all spiritual wisdom and understanding” (Col. 1:9); “to please Him in all respects” (Col. 1:10); “bearing fruit in every good work” (Col. 1:10); “strengthened with all power” (Col. 1:11); and, “for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience” (Col. 1:11; see, also, Col. 2:3, 9-10). He wants us to know that every spiritual need that we have is to be found fully in Christ. So why go elsewhere?

Paul modifies this true knowledge of God’s will with two words (Col. 1:9): “in all spiritual wisdom and understanding.”

A. The knowledge of how God wants us to live requires spiritual wisdom.

“Spiritual” is emphatic by position and applies both to “wisdom” and “understanding.” Spiritual wisdom and understanding come from God’s Spirit and stand in contrast to the worldly wisdom of the false teachers (Col. 2:23). “Wisdom” is an Old Testament concept emphasized often in the Book of Proverbs. The same Greek words for both “wisdom” and “understanding” often occur together in the Septuagint, as in Proverbs 9:10:

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom,  
And the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.

The main idea behind the Hebrew concept of wisdom is “skill.” The men who were able to construct the tabernacle according to God’s plan as revealed to Moses are called “wise,” meaning skillful (Exod. 31:3, 6; 36:1-2). Just as a skilled carpenter can take a piece of rough wood and shape it according to a plan into a beautiful and useful piece of furniture, so the wise person is able to take the rough elements of life and shape them according to God’s plan into something beautiful and useful to Him. Spiritual wisdom requires learning about God and how He wants us to live so that our lives will not be ruined by sin, but rather will become a finely crafted product that will cause others to be attracted to the Maker, who displays His glory in us.

B. The knowledge of how God wants us to live requires spiritual understanding.

Wisdom and understanding are somewhat synonymous, but there may be a subtle nuance of difference. “Wisdom” refers to knowing how God’s Word commands us to live, whereas “under-
standing” refers to insight, perception, or the ability to discern between things. Understanding enables us to put the pieces of wisdom together in specific situations. In 2 Timothy 2:7, after using the analogies of the soldier, the athlete, and the farmer, Paul tells Timothy, “Consider what I say, for the Lord will give you understanding in everything.” The Lord would enable Timothy to grasp mentally the truths of those analogies and put them together so as to gain insight into how he should conduct his ministry.

Early in the 20th century Bishop H. C. G. Moule (Colossian and Philemon Studies [Christian Literature Crusade], p. 58) warned against what he called “an untheological devotion,” or a sentimental religion which thought that it could be healthy on a minimum of reasoned doctrine. But, he said, such people are easily swayed by the current fashions of thought or by attractive personalities. More recently, D. A. Carson (A Call to Spiritual Reformation [Baker/IVP], p. 104) observed that in the Western church, “the knowledge of God declines while our fascination with techniques and fads increases.” He’s right. I often get offers to attend pastors’ conferences or buy books that promise to tell me how to have a successful church. But these techniques and fads come more from the world than from God’s Word. Spiritual understanding is the ability that God gives to be able to bring together the principles of His Word so that we can stand against the ungodly trends of our times.

How do you become filled or controlled by the knowledge of God’s will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding? To illustrate, when I was in the Coast Guard and we were navigating in the fog, we used two things to keep from running into something. First, we used our radar, which would show up an object as a little blip on the screen. We couldn’t see it out the window because of the dense fog, but the radar said, “Look out! Something is out there!” But in addition to the radar, we’d send a man to stand on the bow. Sometimes it was so foggy that you could barely see him, but he would wear a headset so that he could talk with the bridge. Sometimes he could see something from his vantage point that those on the bridge couldn’t see.

In the same way, two things have helped me grow in spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that my life hasn’t run aground in the moral fog of this world. The first is prayerfully to read and
meditate on the Word of God. By reading the Bible over and over and thinking about what it says and asking God for understanding, I can see the blips of danger on the screen and avoid smashing into them. God’s Word exposes the dangerous winds of doctrine that are blowing in our times. It also reveals the way that Satan has tempted people in the past and the consequences when they have yielded to his evil schemes. All of you men should burn into your minds the portrait of the foolish man in Proverbs 7, whose first mistake was to go near the home of the loose woman. Then he succumbed to her enticement, “as a bird hastens to the snare. So he does not know that it will cost him his life” (Prov. 7:23). God’s Word imparts spiritual wisdom and understanding.

The second way I’ve been helped is by reading church history and Christian biographies. God’s Word is like the radar, but reading church history is like the guy on the bow. You don’t depend on him alone, but sometimes he can help you interpret what you’re seeing on the radar screen or point out something that you missed. By reading what God’s people have faced down through the centuries and how they either succeeded or failed, you gain insight into our times.

For example, in his book The Puritans: Their Origins and Successors [Banner of Truth], Martyn Lloyd-Jones has a chapter on “Sandemanianism.” I had never heard that term until I read that chapter back in the late 1980’s, but I instantly realized that this error from a man named Robert Sandeman in the early 1700’s was exactly the same error that John MacArthur combats in his books, The Gospel According to Jesus [Zondervan] and Faith Works [Word]. It’s the error that saving faith involves only bare assent to the work of Christ, not repentance. Also, by reading (twice now) Iain Murray’s two-volume biography of Dr. Lloyd-Jones, I’ve learned how he insightfully applied God’s Word to the spiritual battles in his day. That has helped me navigate the foggy waters of our day.

As we grow in the knowledge of how God wants us to live, the result is that we will walk worthily of the Lord, pleasing Him in every way.

2. **Spiritual growth means walking in a manner worthy of the Lord as we seek to please Him in all things.**
The knowledge of God's will leads to a walk that is worthy of the Lord. The result of all biblical knowledge should be godly conduct. And the primary motive for godly conduct is not that we can live a happier and better life (although that always is the result), but rather that we please and glorify the Lord.

Before we look at the four ways Paul says that we can please the Lord, note that this is a walk. That implies steady progress in a deliberate direction. You don’t get there by a dramatic spiritual experience or a quick fix, but rather by steady, deliberate, day by day growth in understanding through God’s Word.

It’s also a walk that is “worthy of the Lord.” Dr. Carson (pp. 105-106) explains that this had a more profound meaning in the first century, where most cultures were shame-based. In America we don’t usually think this way, but in shame-based cultures, to dishonor your father is a really big deal. So here Paul is urging these new believers to live in a way that would bring honor to the Lord, who gave Himself on the cross to rescue them from Satan’s domain of darkness (Col. 1:13-14). So in every situation, we should ask, “What sort of speech or conduct would honor or glorify the name of the Lord? What would please Him the most?” Paul spells out four ways that we can please the Lord:

A. We please the Lord when we bear fruit in every good work.

Fruit is what God accomplishes through us as we depend on Him. As Jesus taught (John 15:5), “I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing.” Good works are the outworking of the life of Christ flowing through us as we rely on Him. Although we could go into more detail, fruit generally consists of Christlike character, conduct, and converts (Rom. 15:26-28; 1 Cor. 16:15; Gal. 5:22-23; Heb. 12:11; 13:15). We’re saved by grace through faith apart from works, but genuine saving faith inevitably produces good works (Eph. 2:8-10). While fruit takes time, if there is no sign of fruit, a person should question his faith.

B. We please the Lord when we increase in the knowledge of God.
This phrase may mean that we are growing to know God better. Or, it could mean that we are growing by knowing God better. Either way, there is the idea that we must know God Himself. Since God is an infinite being, to know Him is an infinite process. As a parent, it always pleases me when my children want to spend time with me so that they can know me better. In the same way, we please God when we desire to spend time with Him in His Word so that we can know Him better.

The knowledge of God (vs. 10) is inseparably connected with the knowledge of His will (vs. 9) and with obedience to that will (walking worthily, pleasing Him, bearing fruit, v. 10). In John 14:21, Jesus said, “He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me; and he who loves Me will be loved by My Father, and I will love him and will disclose Myself to him.” If you want to get to know Jesus better, then obey Him. He only reveals Himself to those who obey Him.

You can see this principle in human relationships. You don’t disclose yourself to those who are not worthy of your trust. You won’t share your heart with just anyone, but only with those who care enough about you to keep your trust. In the same way, when the Lord sees that we love Him and are trustworthy because we obey Him, He will reveal Himself to us. It pleases God when we bear fruit and grow to know Him better through His Word.

C. We please the Lord when we are strengthened with His power to be steadfast and patient.

“Strengthened” is a present participle, indicating our need for a continual infusion of God’s power. “All” power points to the fact that it is an unlimited supply. “According to His glorious might” is literally, “according to the might of His glory.” God’s glory is the outward manifestation of His splendor or inherent majesty. Often in the Old Testament, it was a blinding light, a bright cloud, or lightning with thunder. Whenever anyone encountered God’s glory, he fell to his face in awe and reverence, afraid that he would die.

In the New Testament, we see God’s glory in Jesus Christ (John 1:14). Sometimes it was veiled, but at other times, such as on the Mount of Transfiguration, when He performed miracles, in the Garden when the soldiers fell backwards, or on the cross when the
sky was darkened and the earth quaked, His glory was seen. God’s glory in Christ knocked the belligerent Paul to the ground, blinding him, and bringing him into submission to Jesus Christ.

Paul here says that we please the Lord when we are strengthened with all power according to the might of His glory. I ask you, as I’ve asked myself, do you experience this mighty power of God in your life? Before you answer, keep reading! Otherwise, you may think, “If I were experiencing God’s mighty power, I’d see people miraculously healed through my prayers. I’d command demons and they would flee. I’d see the dead raised. I’d preach and 3,000 would get saved. I’d always see dramatic answers to my prayers.

But that’s not what Paul says. He says (Col. 1:11), “Strengthened with all power, according to the might of His glory, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience.” Huh? You don’t need steadfastness and patience if God is miraculously delivering you in every situation. You only need steadfastness (endurance in trials) and patience (bearing with difficult people) when there are no miraculous deliverances! The word “joyously” can either go with “steadfastness and patience” or with “giving thanks.” Either way, Paul is saying that when we bear up in difficult circumstances or with difficult people with joy in the Lord because of His great salvation, we are experiencing God’s mighty power in our lives. We please the Lord when we experience His sufficiency in our weakness and His grace to sustain us in our trials (2 Cor. 12:7-10).

Thus we please the Lord when we bear fruit, when we grow to know God better, and when we experience His power so that we are steadfast and patient in our trials. Finally,

D. We please the Lord when we joyously give thanks to Him for His great salvation.

Col. 1:11b-12, “... joyously giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light.” As I said, “joyously” could go either with steadfastness and patience or with giving thanks. Either way, the point is that when we go through trials, we please God if we don’t grumble, but rather are filled with joyful thanksgiving to Him. We live in a world of grumblers. If we are joyously thankful people, we’ll stand out as lights in the darkness (Phil. 2:14-15).
How do you develop this joyous, thankful attitude in the midst of difficult problems or difficult people? Paul’s answer is to set your mind of the fact that the Father has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in the light (the Greek text has the definite article before “light”). The picture in Paul’s mind is the division of the land of Canaan in the Old Testament. After Israel conquered Canaan, they divided up the land by lot. Each tribe received a portion of the land to live on and pass on to their descendants after them.

Even so, Paul is saying that the Father has given us an inheritance that we share with all the saints in the light. We all have Christ in us and enjoy His full salvation. Individually, we’ve been given gifts to use for the common good. And, we should pass this spiritual heritage down to our children and grandchildren. They should see our joy in the Lord, even when we go through trials, and want to experience the same blessings that we enjoy.

**Conclusion**

There used to be a lot of ways I could tell that my kids were growing. I could measure them on the growth chart. I could see their pant legs creeping up over their socks. They needed bigger shoes. They started eating as much as I eat. Personally, they were growing when they started thinking about life’s important issues and talking with me about more grown up things. In their case, it happened all too quickly! Now, they’re all married, rearing children of their own.

How can you tell if you’re growing spiritually? There are many different ways. But here Paul shows that you’re growing if you’re learning more and more through God’s Word how He wants you to live. And you’re growing if, as His child, you’re seeking to live as He wants you to live in order to please Him.
Application Questions

1. What has helped you most to grow spiritually?

2. How would you help a struggling Christian who said, “How can I walk worthily of the Lord when I feel so unworthy?”

3. What should we do if we don’t feel like pleasing God? Is it hypocritical to obey when we don’t feel like it?

4. Spiritual growth often seems so slow. Is there any way to speed up the process? How?

Copyright, Steven J. Cole, 2015, All Rights Reserved.