

**Introduction:**

- A. *Illus.*: I remember watching *West Wing* several years ago just before Thanksgiving when I was surprised to see an episode entitled “Shibboleth” built around a strange, virtually unknown story from Judges 12. Here are two scenes. [Netflix, Season 2, Episode 8, 24:07 - 25:18; 30:10 - 32:28]
- B. How do you tell a *real* Christian from all the people who call themselves Christians? In **Col. 1** the Apostle Paul says that a genuine follower of Christ is one who “*lives a life worthy of the Lord and pleases him in every way.*” Then he lists four ways a true Christian pleases Christ. If you see these, you’re looking at a Christian. If you don’t see them, no matter what the person says, you are probably not looking at a Christian. **A Christian pleases the Lord in these ways:**
- *Bearing fruit in every good work*, - Notice: not just *doing* good works but bearing *spiritual fruit*—soul growth—in the good works we do.
  - *Growing in the knowledge of God* – he means the inward knowledge, not just the facts but the relationship
  - *Being strengthened [with God’s power] so that you may have great endurance and patience*, - there’s one you can’t fake! Christians are born again into trouble. We face the same troubles other people face but also the pressure against us in the world. The 84-year-old pastor who had been “beaten and imprisoned many times.” What distinguishes a Christian is not the trouble but the response: *great endurance and patience*. Hard to fake that!
  - *Giving joyful thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the*

*kingdom of light.* – Here are people who not only thank God for sunny days and babies. They thank God primarily because, no matter what they face here, they are heirs of God himself and members of a *kingdom of light* while living like lights in this dark world.

- C. That describes the “*life worthy of the Lord, that pleases him in every way.*” **Those are evidences no one can fake.** What’s more, they are **evidences no one can produce on their own.** We can do a good work but we can’t make it bear fruit in our own soul nor anyone else’s. I can study theology but I can’t grow in intimacy with God unless he comes to meet me. I can’t must muscle up in the face of trouble. I need to *be strengthened* with God-given power if I am to endure with patience. I will not be *joyfully giving thanks to the Father*, especially under pressure, unless God himself ignites that joy within me. **Doing those things don’t make us Christians but they are undeniable, irrefutable evidence that we are Christians.**
- D. This wouldn’t be much of a sermon if I just finished with a story, slapped you on your collective fannies, and told you to go do those things. **If we can’t do these things on our own how do they become characteristics of our lives? Turn to Col. 1:9-12**, and let’s follow the spiritual logic here. **Vv.9-10a**,

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

**So how can we see these evidences of a true Christian develop in our lives? What do you see.**

I. IN ORDER TO LIVE AS CHRISTIANS, PRAY FOR TRANSFORMED THINKING (v.9)

- A. In one sense, Paul prayed because he couldn't do anything else. He was in prison in Rome 1300 miles away. But the implication here is that prayer is the Christian's key to a transformed life. Why is that? Because **prayer is faith expressed to God**. Heb. 11:6 says, "*Without faith it is impossible to please God.*" That doesn't just mean the faith we bring when we accept Christ as Savior. It means that we *live by faith*, and **prayer is faith expressed to God**.
- B. So what do we pray for? **V.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 he would pray, "*Father, fill my brothers and sisters there in Colossae with the knowledge of your will no matter what they're facing.*" Then you can see he adds, "*through all the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives.*" In other words, **teach them how to think**. For you and me to be filled with the knowledge of God's will requires God to instill in us "*wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives.*" We don't have that kind of thinking ability.

*Illus.:* You know how there are people who can just *think* completely different than you can. A person who can work out complicated math problems in their head, or who can hear a piece of music once and sit down and play it. You and I do not have the capacity to think as Christians should think, and without that capacity we cannot live as Christians should live. And that is why we must continually "*ask God to fill you with the knowledge of his will through all wisdom and understanding.*"

- C. There's a subplot here in this letter. Notice the words *knowledge*, *wisdom*, and *understanding*. Those are hot words here. The Colossian church was being infiltrated by gnostics. Gnostics got their name from the Greek word *gnosis*, meaning knowledge—*secret* knowledge beyond mere human understanding. They wove that into Christianity, suggesting that there was a kind of elite, exclusive club of Christians who knew spiritual mysteries and secrets about the world, salvation and Christ that ordinary Christians didn't know. Paul wrote a few verses later in this letter: *I'll tell you the mystery. It's no secret any more. Here it is in plain language: "Christ in you is your hope of glory."* So that's the backstory to Paul's prayer asking "*God to fill you with the **knowledge** [gnosis] of his will,*" not by exploring secret mysteries but "*through the **wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives.***"
- D. With these two words—*wisdom and understanding*—Paul is saying that God wants to shape our mind *generally*, *broadly*—(that's the *wisdom* part), and *specifically*—the *understanding* part—so that when it comes time to know the will of God for a specific situation we will be able to think right.

So when we pray for God's **wisdom** broadly we are asking that we would grow in things like doctrine, in general grasp of the Bible, in understanding the heart, in how to think about the world. You open your Bible and pray, *Lord, open my eyes to your truth. Teach me your ways.* **Wisdom given by the Holy Spirit has to do with seeing all of life overshadowed by Christ.** Imagine being in a cathedral with a huge stained-glass window of Christ. Everything you see is colored by Christ. **Spirit-given wisdom is seeing everything colored by Christ.**

Spirit-given “understanding” is seeing a particular situation through the eyes of Christ. What is God up to in *this*? How should a Christian think or act *in this*? Because a Christian facing challenges of any kind should invariably *think* differently than others. And that different *thinking* changes our perspective and our behavior. Illus.: We received a letter from **Scott and Jeanne**, serving Jesus in a difficult Middle Eastern country. They described facing an increasingly volatile, anti-western climate plus a smear campaign by some local Catholic leaders. Then Scott wrote, “*God never promised us earthly peace and stability; He promised that ‘in this world you will have trouble’ (John 16:33). He can use instability and conflict to advance His purposes just as He can use stability and peace to do so.*” That comment shows a Spirit-given understanding of a difficult trial. The Holy Spirit taught him to pray that way.

By looking at life “*through the wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives*” we can “*know God’s will.*” We can’t think this way by ourselves. It is ‘spiritual’—the doing of the Holy Spirit—a way of seeing and thinking that is given us by God as a gift. So that is why Paul *prayed* for this kind of thinking. A student introduced me to the phrase “gospel fluency,” a phrase coined in a book by **Jeff Vanderstelt**. He explains, “*You gain fluency in a language when you move from merely translating an unfamiliar language into a familiar one to interpreting all of life through that new language. It happens when you can think, feel, and speak in a language. In a sense, the new language becomes the filter through which you perceive the world and help others perceive your world and theirs.*” (*Gospel Fluency*, 40).

Some examples: Someone you love has just broken your heart. The first question we probably ask is, *What am I going to do?* But the right question is, *How does God want me to think about this?* And that must lead to, *I must ask him for his wisdom and understanding.* School is crushing you. How do you *pray?* You can't pay your bills. How do you *pray?* And what we pray is this: "Lord, how do you want me to think about this situation?" *Give me all wisdom and understanding from your Spirit so that I might know your will for me in this.*

God will not usually tell you why a hard thing happens. He never told Job and he may not tell you. But he will help you to think through how to respond, just as he helped Job.

So we open our Bibles and read. We listen carefully to the sermon, to the radio or podcast, to the book that we're reading. We talk to godly friends in our Growth Group and seek their counsel. **These are the ways that our faith finds its footing, the ways our prayers get a grip on God's reality.** Those are the means through which the Holy Spirit gives us wisdom and understanding. And gradually God will shape our thinking. **In fact, we will gain the very mind of Christ!**

Why pray for transformed thinking? **V.10:** *"so that you may live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way."* The only way to a life worthy of the Lord is through **v.9.**

## **II. TRANSFORMED THINKING IS THE ONLY ROUTE TO GODLY LIVING (v.10)**

Look what happens when God transforms our thinking:

- A. "We may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way." What an astounding statement! Worthy of the Lord!?! Please him in every way!?! Here's the thing:

God isn't looking for you to be perfect, nor even trying to be perfect. He's pleased when we trust and obey him. **He delights in faith that follows his will.**

Illus.: I spoke on the phone this week with Maureen Dwyer. It's been a long time since she's been able to be in church. She called to thank me and you for the way this church never forgets her. She told me how she prays for her unsaved family members and how she prays for me. When I prayed for her at the end of our conversation, I thanked God for her faithfulness to him, despite so many difficult things in her life for a long time. Maureen isn't the perfect Christian, as she'd readily tell you, but she is living a life worthy of the Lord because she trusts him and obeys him.

B. This is the spiritual process that brings us to those four unmistakable evidences of a true Christian life. Now look again at **vv.10b-12:**

1. Transformed thinking leads to “bearing fruit in every good work.” **“Bearing fruit” is a biblical metaphor for growing souls.** A cup of cold water given to someone in Jesus' name does more than quench thirst. It touches the soul of the thirsty. **And that's what happens when we pray about the good deeds we do.**
2. Transformed thinking leads to “growing in the knowledge of God.” The best theologians among us are those who have come to know and love God deeply through knowing and doing *his will* in the crucibles of life. They've prayed to know how to *think*, how to be wise, and then they've followed God's direction. D. L. Moody said something like, *“The best worshippers are those whose Bibles are bound in shoe leather.”*
3. The third evidence of a true Christian addresses how we handle trouble. Illus.: Linus, in the *Peanuts* cartoon

strip, said, “*No problem is so big it cannot be run away from.*” When Br’er Rabbit wanted to escape his briar patch, Uncle Remus told him, “*You cain’t run from trouble. There ain’t no place that far.*” That’s why this is such a wonderful statement: “*being strengthened with all power according to his glorious might so that you may have great endurance and patience.*”

The strength God gives us is the same strength that raised Christ from the dead! And he infuses us with that strength. So then we can defeat every enemy and overcome every struggle?? Nope. “*So that you may have great endurance and patience.*” You might not even feel particularly strong. In fact, from my observation, you probably won’t. You’ll *feel* weak and vulnerable, but you are not.

I read these lines by the poet, **Abigail Carroll**:  
*Let us give praise for pauses, postponements, delays,  
which tutor the will and prune desire.  
If longing breeds art, poetry, gratitude, prayer, then  
waiting is part of learning who we are.”*

**So we pray that we might have transformed thinking.**

4. Transformed thinking leads to “joyfully giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of his holy people in the kingdom of light.” I have often been with Christians under great pressure who display a quiet peace and joy in the Lord despite their circumstances. They actually “*give thanks to the Father,*” for their overwhelming privileges and position. Our joy stands on the promise in **v.13** that “*he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in*

*whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*” He has put us out of the reach of this world’s darkness and alienation.

True Christians who are trusting God’s will, even in life’s hardest times, don’t generate joy. We are *given* joy. **Teilhard de Chardin** wrote, “*Joy is the most infallible sign of the presence of God.*” So we pray that we might have transformed thinking.

### **Conclusion:**

How can you tell who is a genuine Christian? Not necessarily by what we say—our creed or our testimony. Jesus said, “*By their fruit you will recognize them.*” Mt 7:16,20 If your life doesn’t show the kind of fruit we’ve seen here then your life isn’t pleasing the Lord. Simple as that. If those qualities never show up you’re simply not a Christian.

But we cannot bear the fruit of a Christian life by trying harder nor being religious. The only way we can “*live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way,*” is to “*ask God to fill us with the knowledge of his will through all wisdom and understanding that the Spirit gives.*” That is a prayer God always answers with a hearty *Yes!* That is a prayer that will change your life!

What was that exchange?

Mr. President, Christianity is not demonstrated through a recitation of facts.

*You're seeking evidence of faith. A wholehearted acceptance of God's promise of a better world. " For we hold that man is justified by faith alone, " is what St. Paul said.*

*Justified by faith alone. Faith is the true. I' m trying to-- Shibboleth. Faith is the true shibboleth.*

Yes, it is.

*And you, sir, just said the magic word in more ways than one.*