

DID YOU SEE THAT CATCH?

Colossians 1:9-12

Two weeks ago the New York Giants were playing the Dallas Cowboys. New York had the ball on the Dallas 43 yard line. When the ball was snapped, New York wide receiver Odell Beckham Jr. raced down the right sideline covered closely by Dallas defensive back Brandon Carr. Quarterback Eli Manning launched a pass toward Beckham that appeared to be overthrown. But inside the 5 yard line right next to the sideline Beckham leaped into the air turning 180 degrees to face the ball as he did so. High in the air he reached back behind his head at full extension and got his thumb and two fingers on the ball. Somehow the ball stuck in his hand as he crashed onto his back in the end zone for a touchdown. What he did is incredibly difficult. Many are saying it was the greatest catch they've ever seen.

So what? We're not here to talk about football. The reason I bring this up is that I want you to keep the image of that man making that play in your head and use it as a reminder what you and I can be, of what we might do in a spiritual sense. Hopefully you will see what I mean as we look at Colossians 1:9-12. In this passage we get a glimpse of the kind of life God has made possible for us to live, and it is an exciting life! Let's consider Paul's words together.

GOD HAS GIVEN US A GREAT QUEST

Following Jesus was never intended by God to be a complacent activity that we do by rote, just going through the motions. There is a message in these verses that can infuse our lives with passion! It is not new. There is no hidden secret here. These words were written nearly 2000 years ago. But there is truth that we easily forget, to our own impoverishment.

Paul mentioned in verse 3 that he prayed for the Colossians. He gave thanks for their faith and their love. In these verses we see specifically what he prayed for them. He prayed that God would "fill you with the knowledge of his will through all spiritual wisdom and understanding." Many scholars discuss the difference between wisdom and understanding and end up missing the forest because they are so focused on the individual trees. Paul simply was praying that his readers would be filled with the knowledge of God's will, which requires something more than merely intellectual ability. It is spiritually received and discerned, not merely reasoned out through great mental ability.

In the Greek and Roman cultures philosophy was a very big deal. Paul's point is that contrary to what many philosophers in that day believed, knowing God's will is not

something we merely reason out. This is as true today as it was then. It requires us submitting to God's revelation of his truth and allowing the Spirit of God to enable us to see its application to our lives.

Notice that Paul prayed that his readers would be "filled" with the knowledge of God's will. He did not want them to merely know some about God's will. He wanted them to be filled with it. If I had an 8 ounce glass and I put an ounce of juice in the bottom of it you would say I have a glass with juice in it. But if I fill that glass completely with juice you would call it a glass of juice. The juice becomes the thing that identifies the glass. Paul's prayer is not that we would have a little knowledge of God's will in us, but that we would be filled with that knowledge. The knowledge of his will would identify the kind of person we are.

If we are filled with knowledge of God's will that would touch every corner of our lives. What should be my priorities in life? The will of God would speak to that. Who should I marry? God's will is the determining factor in that decision. How should I treat my spouse? God's will tells me. How should I use my money? God's will decides. So it goes in every aspect of life. What kind of student I am in school, what kind of employee I am at work, how I raise children, how I relate to parents, what kind of friend I am, what kind of entertainment I partake of, my sexuality, everything in my life is impacted when I am filled with knowledge of God's will.

Our son-in-law Michael is a Marine flight instructor. His job is to train young Marine officers in how to be a fighter pilot flying high performance jet aircraft. He recently was out here training those pilots in the use of the aircraft's weapons systems. These are pilots who have been thoroughly trained in all the basics of flying the aircraft, including flying in formation. They were now learning how to actually be a combat pilot and use the plane as a weapon. He was dismayed by how the students seemed to forget the basics about things like the proper way to join up with a leader in a formation. There is a specific procedure for doing that because if you don't do it right you can actually put yourself and others in danger. Michael told us that it is dismaying how many of those students have what the instructors call NAFOD. That is a military acronym meaning "no apparent fear of death." They periodically will do something that is inherently dangerous because they don't realize the peril their actions put them in. That is not a good quality for a pilot. The big problem for Michael is that when one of his students manifests that dubious character trait, Michael is in the airplane with him. The kid is trying to kill him. How is he to treat such a pilot? Even in that situation his reaction is to be tempered and controlled by the will of God. Many of us parents had to go through a similar experience when teaching our kids how to drive.

There is a really key truth for us to remember here. God loves us. He loves us to a degree that we cannot comprehend, we can only marvel at. What does that tell you about his will? If you love someone deeply what do you want for them? I think of my children. I want them to have the best possible lives. That's what love means. When Laurie and I were raising our kids we often had rules and lots of instruction and guidance for them. Why did we do that? Was it because we wanted to mess with their minds? Was it because we took devilish delight in making them jump through hoops? Was it because we hoped they would hate their lives and resent us? No, it was always because we wanted them to experience the best possible life. We had one of those golden moments that are precious to parents when Carissa was in college and Toby was still in high school. We had some rules for our kids about dating in the high school years. We weren't draconian about it, but we were more strict than some parents. We ran into the "but all my friends" objection more than once. The golden moment in question happened when Carissa was home from college and we were dealing with some push back from Toby regarding our rules. Carissa listened to the discussion for some time then jumped in and said, "Toby, I felt the way you did when I was in high school, but now that I'm a couple of years out of that I can see that Mom and Dad are right. They are being really wise and looking out for your best interest." Man that was a great moment. My point here is because we love our kids our will for them was always aimed at their own good. We aimed imperfectly, but God does not. The fact that he loves us means his will for us is always good, acceptable and perfect. While sometimes we may be mystified by his will or may even chafe at it like our kids chafed at their parents seemingly archaic and restrictive ideas, we must always remember that his will is perfectly aimed at bringing about our good.

Psalm 25:8 says "Good and upright is the Lord." Psalm 34:8 says, "Taste and see that the Lord is good; blessed is the one who takes refuge in him." God is good, and is always seeking good for us. Lamentations 3:25 says, "The Lord is good to those whose hope is in him."

However, all of us know that it is possible to know something without that thing actually changing our actions. It is possible for us to even intellectually accept that God's will is good for us, yet somehow not live in submission to it. There are lots of people around us who continue a tobacco habit even though they know that it is destroying their health and could kill them. It is quite possible to be filled with knowledge of God's will without having his will inform our choices and actions. This is not what Paul wanted, and it is certainly not what God wants. We see that in what Paul said next.

The reason Paul prayed what he did is so that "you may live a life worthy of the Lord and may please him in every way." In other words, Paul desired that we be filled with

the knowledge of God's will to the point that it impacts the way we live. We should live "worthy of the Lord." This is the quest God gives us for our lives. It is to live worthy of him. It is to live in a way that is worth how great he is, how good he is, that is worth what he has done for us. This is to become the driving force in our lives, the North Star we steer by at every moment of every day.

In Ephesians 4:1 Paul said a similar thing when he said we should "live a life worthy of the calling you have received." God has done the incredible thing of calling us to be his children, part of his kingdom. This is an astounding thing. In his book *Home By Another Way* (p. 174) author Robert Benson tells the story of how he got engaged to Sara, who would become his wife. They were sitting in a sunny garden watching some birds when he asked her, "What are you thinking about?" She said, "I'm thinking about getting married." He said, "So am I." Then they went back to watching the birds. The next evening they were driving to a restaurant to have dinner. Sara reached over, turned down the radio and said, "To you." He said, "Oh, good! This is going to work out great!" That's how they decided to get married. I'm not the most creative and romantic guy in the world, but even I was able to do better than that. Years ago in a former ministry during a staff meeting somehow one of the women on the staff talked about how she and her husband decided to get married. She said they just kind of agreed at one point that they would get married. One of the single girls was appalled. She couldn't believe it happened like that. She concluded, "Well I'd better get a freaking proposal." Later we made a T-shirt for her with those words on the front of it. Why did that matter to her? Because she wants to be chosen. She wants to know she's special. She wants to be called. God has chosen us, he has called us, and we will see next week what an incredible gift that is. But how can we ever be worthy of that calling?

We are in the season of Christmas. This season reminds us of what it took to call us. It required the Son of God to humble himself by becoming a human infant, submitting to all the indignities and trials of living as a human, eventually culminating in the horrible, unjust, humiliating and excruciating torture of death on a cross. He did that to call us to himself as special. And we are to live worthy of that!

Imagine that the President announces that he is going to give out a new award. It is the Citizen of the Year award. It will be given to a person who embodies what an American citizen should be. He then announces that this year the winner is...you! There will be a formal White House dinner to honor you and give you the award. Everyone on the A list in Washington will be there plus some Hollywood celebs. Carrie Underwood will sing the national anthem and provide entertainment. The night of the big event arrives. Would you show up an hour late because you decided you needed to finish some yard work at home and it took longer than you thought? Would you arrive wearing shorts, a

T-shirt and flip flops? I don't think so. Wouldn't you be humbled, thinking you don't deserve this award? And wouldn't make sure that you look your absolute best, wanting not to embarrass yourself or the President? Your efforts to look your best and arrive promptly do not earn the award you are given, that has already been decided. Your efforts to show well are the response to what you have already been given. That is how we should seek to be worthy of the Lord.

In his book *Behold His Glory* Sam Storms wrote, "People should walk away from having observed us saying, 'My goodness, what an incredible God he or she believes in!'" This is the quest. It is a noble, compelling pursuit. It is worthy of our best thoughts, our greatest passion, our most diligent efforts. It should be our dream to fulfill this quest in everything we do, big and small. But it leaves us with the question of what we could ever do that would be worthy of the Lord?

Obviously nothing we are or nothing we do is going to literally be worthy of our God and what he has done for us. What God desires from us is not that we would literally be worthy of him, but that we would respond to his love by trying to now live worthy of him. And in this passage Paul shows us how.

GOD HAS GIVEN US A DESCRIPTION

This is not a formula or a 4 step program for living worthy of the Lord. This is not a check the box sort of thing. Paul is just spitting out a few descriptions of the type of things that are worthy of the Lord. There are others. These ideas give us a general description of the direction we will want to go.

Do Good Works

Sometimes Christians seem to have a mostly negative view of what the Bible calls holiness. It consists of all the things we don't do. We don't go to those kinds of parties or watch those kinds of movies, we don't engage in those kinds of activities, and so on. The only positive things that we talk about are we go to church, we pray, read the Bible and give some money to the Lord.

When I coached my son's hockey teams in his youth and especially in high school I noticed there were some kids that mostly just tried not to do anything bad when they played. They usually were not very good players who were trying to mask their own inability and insecurity. Actually I was like that as a player. The highest aspiration was to not do something awful. I always marveled at my own son who seems to be an adrenaline junkie who thrives on pressure. He wanted the most pressure packed position, one that made the most difference, thus was the most visible. He was not like me. The problem with those kids who mostly wanted to not do anything noticeably bad is that

meant you mostly wouldn't notice whether they were there or not. Afterward you'd wonder, did that kid actually play in the game because I never saw him.

Coaches talk about playmakers. In football it's the defensive player who surges into the other team's backfield and makes a tackle for loss or sacks the quarterback. It's the defensive back who breaks up a pass or makes an interception. It's the wide receiver who goes up for a ball that the quarterback has just thrown up for grabs and somehow comes down with it, the way Odell Beckham did two weeks ago. It's the running back who gets the first down or breaks a long run. In hockey it is the goalie who makes the impossible save or the player who makes an amazing pass and sets up a goal. In other words, playmakers catch your eyes because they make a play.

This passage says what is worthy of the Lord is not merely about not doing something bad, it's about being a spiritual playmaker. We typically groan, thinking that means we have to be the next Billy Graham or be like the missionary that goes to Malawi and lives in the squalor, eating things we don't even want to think about. Those people are certainly spiritual playmakers, but that's not really the kind of "good works" God calls most of us to do.

In John 6:29 Jesus said the work the Father requires is believing in him. As we put our faith in Jesus and trust him day in and day out we are doing a good work. Titus 3:14 says, "Our people must learn to devote themselves to doing what is good, in order that they may provide for daily necessities and not live unproductive lives." In other words, simply being responsible and providing for oneself and for one's family is doing a good work.

Galatians 6:10 says, "As we have opportunity let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers." The good deeds God wants us to bear fruit in is doing good to others. It is easy to see ourselves mostly as reactors. We react to how other people treat us. We can then define being holy as just not reacting in a bad way. Living worthy of the Lord is a much more positive and much more active approach. It calls on us to see ourselves as being there to do good to every person in every relationship. Doing good to a person in any way we can is to be the rule in how we relate to every single person we know. What kind of person the other individual is, the way they treat you, is pretty much irrelevant to this goal. No matter what they are like, no matter what they do, the goal is to do good to them. It is to bless them with your words, attitudes and actions.

I love the story of Tabitha in Acts 9. I know Tabitha was the daughter of Samantha, the witch in the old TV show *Bewitched*, but this Tabitha was the farthest thing from a

witch. Acts 9:36 says she “was always doing good and helping the poor.” This is what a spiritual playmaker does. He or she goes about doing good to spouses, parents, children, siblings, friends, fellow church members, even strangers, and especially the poor.

John Marks, a producer for *60 Minutes*, wrote a book about evangelical Christians, whom he reportedly studied for two years. He rejects our faith, but in his book he could not help noticing. After Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans and the Gulf Coast he saw one Baptist Church in Baton Rouge that fed 16,000 people a day for weeks and another that housed 700 homeless evacuees. He saw that long after the storm and long after government assistance dried up churches were sending teams to clean up and rebuild homes. He wrote, “nothing spoke more eloquently...to nonbelievers than the success of a population of believing volunteers measured against the massive and near total collapse of secular government efforts.”

Laurie and I were going to take a walk. As we were leaving our neighborhood we saw across the street a neighbor who was out for a run. She glanced over, saw us and interrupted her run. She stopped and crossed the street to talk to us. Laurie has made an effort to be a friend to this woman. The lady is a dog lover, and just a few weeks ago her dog died. When Laurie learned of it she bought a sympathy card, wrote a message of concern and compassion in it and mailed it to her. It was a small thing, but it didn't feel small to our neighbor. She specifically wanted to thank Laurie for caring. Laurie was simply doing a good deed that came from her heart, and is one among myriad good deeds she does for people in our neighborhood.

I dealt with a couple who were having marriage difficulties. It is apparent that the thing that would heal their relationship is just seeing their role in the marriage as being there for the sole reason of doing good to their spouse. The usual answer to that is , “Yes, but...” No, no but. Just do good. Remember those little battles brothers and sisters so often have. “He’s on my side of the line. He keeps touching me. He started it.” What if one of the siblings sought to do good no matter what to that offending brother or sister? The little squabbles would disappear quickly.

Grow In Knowing God

Another thing that is worthy of God is when we grow in our knowledge of him. You know, it's possible to be acquainted with a person, sometimes even for a long time, but not actually know them. It is possible to think we know God, but to actually only know our ideas about him. There are a lot of things that people think they know about God that are off base. Perhaps you have seen the clip of Victoria Osteen, wife and co-pastor of Joel Osteen, that has kicked up some dust recently. In this clip she tells the arena full of

people that is their church that they should “do good for your own self. Do good because God wants you to be happy.” She explains that what pleases God is when you are happy.

I think and hope that somewhere in there is some thinking that might actually be true and just came out sounding wrong. But an awful lot of people go around thinking that God wants just that. He wants them to be happy so they should do whatever makes them happy. How do we know whether that is true or not? We have to get to know God as he truly is. We have to grow in our knowledge of him.

Recently Laurie and I were out for breakfast. Laurie, because of some dental issues needed some soft food. She ordered some French toast and soaked it in syrup so it would be mushy and soft, thus easy for her to eat. I was looking at that and thought that’s how a lot of people think God is. He’s kind of mushy and squishy, there’s nothing solid to him. He sort of accepts everything. God is fine with whatever you are and whatever you do. He’s sort of divine French toast. There are people who are at the other extreme. They believe God is rigid, angry, disapproving and quick to rain on everyone’s parade. He is a frowning, glowering, ominous being who is about to rain down violent judgment on everyone.

To live a life worthy of our God it is absolutely crucial that we know him as he is. There are two elements of knowing God. One of the common ways people get off base is they only incorporate one of these two elements into their thinking. One element is the objective. How do we get to know God? Pay attention to what he reveals to us about himself. Many of those faulty images of who God is will be corrected by seeing the entirety of his self-revelation, which we know as the Bible. In it God reveals his character. To truly know God I need to have a clear grasp of what he says about himself.

There’s a scene in the classic movie *A Christmas Story* that I think was taken from my life. It is Christmas morning and Ralphie and Randy are in the middle of gleefully opening their presents, exclaiming joyfully over each new treasure. Then they simultaneously open presents that turn out to be socks. Socks for Christmas? You cannot be serious. They look at each other, shrug their shoulders and toss the socks away. They don’t want socks. They want toys. I was about Ralphie’s age, around 8 when that very scene played out in my brother’s and my life. It was Christmas and an aunt gave us argyle socks. Socks of any kind were a non-starter, but argyle socks were an egregious offense. The problem was that our aunt was operating on her assumptions of what a boy might want. Had she actually known Jerry and me she likely would have come up with a different present. Her “knowledge” about us was inaccurate and it led to an action that was displeasing to us. If our “knowledge” of God is similarly inaccurate it will produce actions displeasing to God.

There is a subjective element of knowing God as well. That subjective element comes from applying our objective knowledge of God to living with him day in and day out, from actually living in his presence. You all could know some objective truth about Laurie, for instance. You could know that she is a kind, optimistic, caring, intelligent person. You could know that she loves music, is talented and has a joyful personality. Such things would likely cause you to admire her. But that is different from what I actually experience. You would not know that life with her is full of laughter because she will say things like when we were talking about exercise recently she said it doesn't matter to her whether I have dashboard abs. When I queried just exactly what dashboard abs look like she ended up nearly rupturing her spleen by laughing so hard. You would not know how incredibly encouraging and affirming she is on a daily basis, and you would not know that just being around her fills my heart with love.

As we live in the presence of God we develop an admiration for him, but also an ever deepening trust of him that is unshakeable no matter what may happen and a love for him that is profound...that love and that trust more than anything are worthy of him. If we don't have that subjective element of knowing God in our day to day lives our knowledge becomes mere dry intellectual knowledge that never touches our hearts. It makes us proud, rigid and arrogant, but it can never make us love God and it cannot recreate his image in us.

Be Strengthened With His Power

We like the idea of power. We like the idea of being powerful people who can do amazing things and impact people and circumstances around us. I fear a lot of Christians go around feeling like there's something wrong with them because they are not more powerful. We read this and feel like we're failing because we should be strengthened with God's power and we don't feel powerful.

How is God's power manifested in us? Paul tells us in this verse. He prayed that we might be strengthened with all power "so that you may have great endurance and patience." God's power enables us to endure and to persevere when life is hard and it would be easy to just quit. In his book, *Pursuing Justice*, Ken Wytsma tells the story of a man in Africa who was born in eastern Congo, a place torn by years of conflict and war. For the past 15 years this courageous Christian man has worked to restore villages that have been decimated by years of rape, murder, and pillage. His life is regularly threatened. At one point his area was visited by executives of a global relief organization. They saw what an effective job he was doing and offered him the job of being the head of all their operations in the Congo. It was a dream job with higher pay, more security and lots of influence. He said thank you but no. He told Wytsma "God

gave me the job I have. He's helped me build the relationships and the respect that I have. He has opened the door for me and kept me safe on every trip out into the bush. I'm right where God has called me to be, so why would I go anywhere else? I don't just want to be good, I want to be where God wants me to be." God's power is manifested in us when we go through hard days, when we face confusing events, when what we hope for does not happen, but we stay patient, we persevere, we endure with hope. That is how God's power is displayed in us.

Give Thanks With Joy

We have just observed Thanksgiving, and we considered how important giving thanks is, but here it is again. G. K. Chesterton wrote, "I would maintain that thanks are the highest form of thought, and that gratitude is happiness doubled by wonder." One scholar wrote that giving thanks essentially is the Christian life. What is worthy of the Lord is that we would be full of his joy because of who he is and what he has done and continues to do for us, and in that continually give thanks.

CONCLUSION

When I was in college I wore glasses. I remember a gray, chilly day in late January that featured intermittent light rain. I was trying to earn a spot on the baseball team and that day we had an intrasquad scrimmage. More than any other practice this provided game like conditions and an opportunity to find out what players can really do. I had a problem. As I was out in the field the light rain started again. It wasn't that big of a problem except the rain drops got on my glasses. The bill of my cap helped some, but at one point a pop fly was hit in my direction. I looked up to track the flight of the ball. It was hard enough to follow it because it was a gray and gloomy day. But now as I looked up the rain drops formed spots on my glasses. Instead of looking up and seeing one ball I saw a bunch of dots. Which one was the ball? If I couldn't figure that out and follow that ball something bad was going to happen. At best I was going to reach out and catch what I thought was a ball when it was actually a drop on my glasses and the ball was going to fall to the ground somewhere in my vicinity making it look like I couldn't perform the routine act of catching a pop fly. At worst the ball was going to come down on my head and add injury to insult, making me both look stupid and hurt as well.

In life we face a task more difficult than that. There are bright lights shining in our eyes and dazzling lures dangling in front of us, all distracting us from the ball. In fact there are phony balls up in the air. The crucial task in life is to keep our eyes on the ball. This passage says the ball is living a life that is worthy of the Lord and what he has done for us. This is the life we were created for. Keep your eyes on the ball every moment of the day and live worthy of our incredible God!