

Knowing God

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[0 : 00] Don't have to negotiate that. Hunter, it's such a joy to have you preaching for us today. So we welcome you warmly and we look forward to hearing God's word from you. Thank you. Well, good morning.

Good morning. My name is Hunter Nicholson and I'm from Mississippi originally. Hopefully I'll finish next to say more tonight. But we've been living in Edinburgh for the past year and we're really thankful to be here.

I'm visiting this month and so I've come up here with my wife and two kids and my mother. And I have to say just coming to hear the children's talk is always worth coming this far just to hear Thomas' children's talk.

So we miss those back at St. Columbus. And every time with Thomas, he always speaks so highly of the church here. And he clearly loves Lewis so much. And it's great to hear a friend talk about him.

And I just say love a place. And then you come see it for yourself. And so I'm really thankful to be with you. So I'm gonna look at Ephesians chapter one this morning and we're starting in verse 15.

[1 : 08] We've already read the text. Probably the more famous part of Ephesians one is what's happened before this for Paul has gone on this one sentence long discourse of just how great our God is and all the wonderful things that he's done for us.

And I have to say when we get to Ephesians one verse 15, one of the things that surprises me and that I love and then someone's convicts me is the way that Paul responds to good news.

And the good news here in verse 15 is he says, he says, I've heard of your faith in Lord Jesus and your love towards all the saints. And I mean, these are high compliments from Paul.

He's saying, you know, what we're called to do as Christians is to love our neighbor and to love God. And Paul's saying, what I have heard about you at Ephesians is that that's what you're doing. And Paul's response to that good news is, not what you might expect in a community like ours sometimes where we say, you know, we only pray for things that are going wrong.

Paul says, I've heard that you're doing well and that doesn't make me wanna pray less for you. I don't say, well, you're the person that I don't need to pray for now. Paul actually says, because I've heard of how great you're doing, I pray for you all the more.

[2 : 21] So there's thanksgiving, but there's also prayer that God will do even more for these people. And it's what he prays for that I wanna spend our time this morning talking about.

Paul says to the Ephesians, what I want God to give you more than anything else in this life is one prayer for the Ephesians is that they will get more knowledge.

And for Paul, knowledge is the key to spiritual growth. And it's so important. It's not, he doesn't just mention it once. If you go back and read some of his other letters, like Bileem and then Colossians and Philippians, and all of these letters, Paul opens up his discussion to the church that he's talking to you by saying, I pray to God for you that you would have more knowledge.

And if Paul is so adamant that even the Christians who are doing really well, that they still need knowledge, then what I wanna ask this morning is, how do we get it?

What is it? Wow, how do we get it? And how does it change us? And that's what I wanna talk about through the text this morning. So the first question to answer is, what kind of knowledge is Paul talking about?

[3 : 32] What is he so desperate that the church can get, even though they're doing so well and they already know God? And you see the answer is in verse 17. He says, he wants them to have a knowledge of him, of God.

He says, I pray that God may give you the spirit of wisdom and a revelation in the knowledge of him. So he prays that God would send a spirit of wisdom to the Ephesians and a revelation, but that's just a means to an end.

He says, what I really want you to have is this knowledge of him. I want you to know God. And if it's not clear what that means, he goes on in verse 18 to clarify and he says, I want you to have this knowledge that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you.

What are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power towards us who believe? There was an old German reformer named Philip Melanchthon who used to work with Martin Luther and he once wrote that to know Christ is to know his benefits.

In other words, the more you know about God and what he's done for us in the gospel, the more you know about what he's done for us in the gospel, the more you know about God, these things go hand in hand. And that's what Paul's saying here.

[4 : 48] He says, I want you to know God and I want you to know what God has done for you. And the more you know what he's done for you, the more you actually know who God is. And Paul says, that's the gospel.

And we could spend several sermons going through all these things that he talks about here. He says, I want you to know the riches of your glorious inheritance of the saints, the immeasurable greatness of his power towards us who believe according to the work of his great might.

And what I love is he just goes off into this long sentence about how great God is. And that wasn't even his purpose in the first place. He was just saying, I want God to give you knowledge, but he can't stop talking about how great Jesus is.

But what I love about this passage is how counterintuitive it is on the face of it. Because Paul is talking to people who claim to believe in God and who Paul talks to them because if they're really Christians and they are really Christians.

And yet he says, what I wish for you is that you would know the gospel, that you would know God. And maybe that would help to see how counterintuitive it is. If I count you after the service and I said, you know, I've been thinking about you.

[6 : 02] I saw you while I was preaching. And my prayer for you is just that you would know the gospel. And I don't know how, I would imagine you might respond to that by saying, what do you mean you wish that I would know the gospel?

I've been coming to this church for 60 years on the face of it, it almost sounds like an insult. But what Paul is saying here is he's not trying to insult the Ephesians.

He's not trying to say, you know, you think you know the gospel, but you have no idea what the gospel is. What he's trying to do is he's saying, the gospel is the kind of knowledge that you can know it.

And then you can spend your whole life learning about it. And you can never come to the end of it. And it's not the exact same thing, but there's a lot of things that are in life that are like that.

Like for instance, if you take a young girl, and assuming she has a healthy relationship with her parents and you say, child, does your father love you?

[7 : 03] And she would say, yes, of course my dad loves me. And he said, would he do anything for you? And she would say, yes, of course, my dad would do anything for me. And then again, hopefully if it's a healthy relationship, you find that same girl 60 years later, and you say, does your dad love you?

Or did your dad love you? And she could say, yes, of course my dad loved me. And she could give the exact same answers. But hopefully she would also say, I knew when I was four that my dad loved me.

But having lived 50 more years, I can also say, I had no idea how much my dad loved me. So the answers are the same, but those words I love you have a way collecting meaning over time, don't they?

And the same thing is true with the gospel, where you can become a Christian when you're younger, at whatever age. And then as you grow deeper and deeper in that faith, you might use the same words to describe your faith.

Things like, I know God loves me. I know I have an inheritance. And yet as you get older, Lord willing, those things mean so much more to you than they did when you first became a Christian.

[8 : 15] And that's what Paul is saying here. He's saying, I want you to know the gospel, and I want you to grow in the knowledge that you already have, so it means so much more. I mean, there's a, I'm sure you've probably heard this famous quote by John Newton, who wrote Amazing Grace, where when he was old, he said, although my memory is fading, I remember two things very clearly.

I'm a great sinner and Christ is a great savior. And a cynic might say, you were a Christian for decades and that's all you learned in all that time, is the very same thing you learned the day you became a Christian.

And one sense the answer is yes. We cling to the same knowledge the day that we were converted, but it means so much more because we see, as we see how God can forgive all of our sins, it collects meaning over time.

And that's what Paul's praying for here, that these truths become, that they will become more intellectually concrete, but that they would actually change our hearts and that we would be changed by this knowledge that God is giving us.

And just as a side note, that's one reason why it makes sense for all of us, even though we all come from such different places and we're all in different ages, we can all come to the same place and worship together because the message that every single one of us needs to hear is the exact same.

[9 : 37] We don't have a room for the advanced Christians and then a room for the beginner Christians. We all need the same knowledge. And the person to the left or the right of you may say, I know God and you know God, but we may have different levels of depth of knowing that God, but that we're cling to the same knowledge.

So what Paul wants the Ephesians to know is the gospel. That's what he wants them to hang on to. And the second question this morning is this, if it's true that Paul wants them to have this knowledge, how does he expect them to get it?

And there's an obvious answer to this question, which is you've come to the knowledge of the gospel by things like reading your Bible, by coming to church, hearing the word preach, singing these songs, and all that is absolutely true, but it's not what Paul focuses on here.

It's not directly what he focuses on here. Paul makes really clear in verse 17, that the only way to get the kind of knowledge that he's talking about is if God gives it to you himself.

So he says in verse 17, that he prays that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, Father of glory, may give you the spirit of wisdom and a revelation in the knowledge of him.

[10 : 58] Having the eyes, he goes on in verse 18, having the eyes of your hearts enlightened. So the way that Paul says that we come to acknowledge the gospel is the Holy Spirit gives it to us in his capacity as the wisdom giver.

And then he says, when that happens, the eyes of your heart are enlightened. And I don't know if you like poetry, that sounds poetic, right? The eyes of your heart enlightened.

But this is more than poetry. So in the ancient Jewish mind, your heart, the way that we talk about heart today is, your brain is the thing that thinks and your heart is the thing that feels.

But for a Jew in the ancient world, your heart was the place where your thinking and your emotions and your will all intercepted.

So you could say your heart is the thing that makes you who you are. And Paul says, in that place inside of you that makes you, you, that's where I want the Holy Spirit to come and open up your eyes so you can see how great God is.

[12 : 04] And he says, the only way that I can come is through the Holy Spirit. And it's like a light shining in the darkness that doesn't affect just your thoughts.

And if it was just your thoughts, all it would take would be just studying. But Paul is saying, you also need to have your will and your emotions changed. So that you can look at something and you can say, I know factually that what's in front of me is beautiful, but also my emotions are turned towards it.

I love it. And my will has changed so that I want to obey God, this wonderful person in front of me.

And I have to be honest, when you think about this, on one level, this can sound a bit unnerving because it means that Christian growth, reaching out for this knowledge that God wants us to have, is not something that we, it's not a do-it-yourself task.

It's not something that we can reach out to and grasp. And if you're someone who is self-sufficient, it's so easy to think, if I just do all the right things, if I follow all, if I do my Bible readings just right, if

I'm at church every Sunday, then I will no doubt grow in this knowledge. And the truth to that is that church and reading and singing and worship is where God meets us. But if God is not there himself in the power of his Holy Spirit, we can't do anything.

[13 : 28] And so the Christian life is this life that's lived in a dependence on something outside of ourselves. I think Paul had to learn this the hard way, didn't he?

Do you remember how he described his life in Philippians? He says, this is how he described who he was before he became a Christian. He said, I was circumcised on the eighth day, traveled Benjamin, Hebrew of Hebrews, a true Pharisee.

Today he might have said, I never missed a service. I was at every prayer meeting. And he may have even said, I was a good name. I was actually kind to the people around me, unlike so many people. I was a good parent.

And all those things are good. And Paul never said that those things were bad. But he looks at all his claims to righteousness. And do you remember what he says after he gives that long list of his accomplishments?

He says, I count it all loss because of the surpassing work of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. So you can see how that relates back to this passage.

[14 : 31] He's saying, the one thing I care about more than anything else in this life is knowing God. And to have that knowledge is to be dependent on God for him to show it to me.

And the reason that Paul isn't unnerved about that fact is because he knows that God is good. And he knows that if he prays, God answers prayers.

So it's not like he's saying, you need this knowledge. And you may or may not get it, we'll see. Paul is confident that if we go to God and ask for knowledge that he would teach us more about the gospel and about how witty he is, that he'll answer.

And that's the whole context of this passage. He's telling the Ephesians, I am going to God for you. And my one prayer for you, I'm asking God that he would give you a spirit that you would know him, that you would know how great he is.

And I'm sure he would tell us the same thing. Go to God in prayer to ask God to show us who he is and how great he is. Now, to be clear, Paul's not trying to separate here between biblical knowledge and this deeper spiritual knowledge that he's talking about.

[15 : 42] As if young Christians, the Bible is for young Christians, but then when you get more mature, you rely on this kind of spirit knowledge that comes from God. That's not what Paul is doing. He loves God's word.

He'd be the first one to argue that we need to be reading the word. But Paul's saying to know this book, to understand this book like we're meant to understand it, it's not enough just to read it. You have to be dependent on God to show you what's in it. We need the Holy Spirit like a floodlight showing us the word.

And that may sound foreign to you, but you probably have this experience sometimes when you've heard a story in the Bible over and over again, and then one day you read it and it just, it strikes your heart.

And you suddenly see in that passage how good God is or who Jesus was. And it makes you love him more. And sometimes that's the Holy Spirit showing us what our eyes couldn't see without him.

[16 : 44] And if all of that's true, then that means that every time we open our Bibles and every time we come to worship, every time we hear Thomas preach from the front or whoever preached from the front, we're not just depending on our own intellectual strength and we're not just depending on the cup of coffee that we drink that morning.

We have to actively depend on the Holy Spirit and we have to look to God every time we come to our word in the morning and say, God, if you don't teach me your word, if you don't show me the treats that you have, I'm never gonna see them for myself.

That's the kind of dependence that Paul has on Jesus Christ. And it's a beautiful dependence to live in, but it's so hard isn't it sometimes because we wanna control our own spiritual growth but every time we do that, we need to be looking at God saying, God, would you help me to grow?

And the last question is this. So the knowledge that we're looking for is the knowledge of Jesus Christ, the knowledge of the gospel, the knowledge of what he's done for us.

And it's the kind of knowledge that once you grasp it, you don't wanna say, okay, I've had enough. You wanna say, I wanna go deeper and deeper and deeper into this. I've heard, I may be speaking

out of my depth here, but in my reading I've heard that the communion services in the islands were famous because you'd come and you'd hear the gospel preached.

[18 : 13] And they would all revolve around what Jesus has done for you and about what he did for us on the cross. And someone from the outside might say, wait a second, you're just teaching the same thing over and over again every single week.

But what we would say is, in one sense, yes, is that every Sunday we teach the exact same message, but in another sense, we want to grow and grow deeper and deeper into this because this is the soil that we want our lives to be planted inside of.

So that's the knowledge we're looking for. We can only get it through the Holy Spirit. When we come to our mouth, we worship, we get it through the Holy Spirit. And then lastly, how does it change us?

So to ask you another way, why does this even matter? And I want to situate that question by just reminding you that the context of this passage is not a classroom.

Paul is not writing this in a classroom. He's most likely he's sitting in prison or under house arrest in Rome. Paul, even if it wasn't imminent, Paul knew that death was an ever-present reality, an untimely death.

[19 : 25] And there's all kinds of risks that he's taking throughout his whole life. And it's in the context of all that suffering and danger and all the spiritual battles, that still, even in all the myths about pain, Paul's one trigger is that the Ephesians would know God.

And it's telling, isn't it? In all the stress that he faces, he still thinks the answer that he is the same, just the knowledge of the gospel. And it's because it's not just intellectually, you know, there is thinking involved and we want to think more deeply.

Paul knows that if you can grasp onto the gospel trees, it's more than just a ticket to heaven.

Forgive us if we ever think that that's the only thing that the gospel contains for us.

He believes that the gospel message is something that actually transforms the people that we are outside the doors of these church every single week. And you can see this in the way that he writes the whole letter.

I mean, the Book of Ephesians is, in my mind, what something like four pages, six chapters. And when you read it, the first three chapters are almost all doctrine.

[20 : 42] They're all teaching, it's all knowledge. And the second three chapters is all mostly application. So first three chapters, knowledge.

Second three chapters is Paul saying, here is how you need to live your life as Christians. But the way that Paul does that, that's not just by chance, he's saying, what it means to be a Christian is to take the knowledge of the gospel and let it sink into your soul so that it actually changes the person that you are the rest of the week.

And just to give a few examples, in Ephesians 4:32, Paul looks at the people and he says, be tenderhearted for giving one another as God and Christ forgave you.

Ephesians 5:1, walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself for us. Ephesians 5:25, husbands love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.

You see what he's doing in every single one of those commands. He's saying, here's how you need to live your life. But the grounds that he's giving for that command is something about what God has done for us.

[21 : 58] And you could say, well, he does that because those are helpful illustrations. But that's not what he's doing. He's saying, to be a Christian is to be someone whose whole life has been transformed by the gospel.

And so he's saying, take this truth that has changed your life and live in a way that actually reflects that truth. So for instance, he says, husbands love your wives as Christ loved the church for her.

And so he's telling men who are married, go home and think about, just sit and think about how much Jesus must have loved you to go to the cross for you.

And he says, think about that kind of love and say, am I loving my wife that much? And he does it over and over again.

Walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself for us. So he's saying, we should be loving all the people around us in a way that's analogous to the love that Jesus Christ has shown us.

[23 : 07] And if you read the second half of Ephesians, what Paul is doing is he's taking the single gospel message and he applies it to every aspect of life. So whether you're a manager, an

employee, a husband, a wife, a child, or a parent, he's saying, wherever you find yourself in this world, your task is to take the knowledge of the gospel and figure out what it means to live out that truth where you are in your job or in your home or with the people that you surround yourself with.

And so he's saying, develop a habit of thinking through the gospel and let that impact every day of your life. I had a friend who coincidentally became a free church minister come visit me once in America.

It wasn't Thomas. And we lived in a very tiny flat. It was a one bedroom flat. And the shower was right next to the kitchen. And I remember one day making breakfast.

And I could hear my friend. He'd gone into the shower. I could hear him talking to himself very strongly. And he came out later in the morning and I said, you know, I heard you talking to yourself in the shower.

What was that about? And people might sing in the shower, but I never heard someone talk. And very matter of fact, he said, you know, every morning when I wake up, I repeat the gospel to myself.

[24 : 30] I find the time, sometimes I have a day to repeat the gospel to myself because I know that I need to hear it. And I need that to set my day as the one truth that I believe in. And that really stuck with me, this fact that he knew that to get through this life, what he needed was to be reminded of God's love for him.

And Paul wants that gospel to be specific. It's not like he says, here's three chapters of doctrine. And the second three chapters is how you can be a good person.

He's saying, I don't want you to be a good person. I don't want you to imitate Christ. I want you to show the kind of forgiveness that in any other context would be unimaginable if the person you weren't looking at was Jesus Christ who had forgiven you so much.

And it's also important for Paul because one of the most dangerous things a Christian can fall into the habit of doing is to flip the order around, where we put life first in Gospel second, where you say, I want the gospel.

And the way that I'm going to try to earn the gospel is by living the commands that Paul gives us later in the Ephesians. Paul is saying, the only way we can ever change is if through the Holy Spirit showing us how good God is and what he's doing for us.

[25 : 53] And I came across an old church of Scotland pastor, who I'm sure many of you have heard before, William Steele, came across one of his recordings.

And he told the story when he was young. And he told this in his old age. But when he was young, he felt like God was telling him that he felt like God was calling him to a line of singleness.

And when he was young and he first felt that calling, he said he was miserable. And he hated the idea of it. And he said he played the piano at his church.

And he said he would play the piano and he would just cry thinking about how difficult the life was that he thought God was calling him to. And then in this talk that I heard him give, just almost as a side note, he ended that story by saying, you know, I didn't know Jesus Christ well enough then to think how wonderful that would be.

You know, so often God, we may sense that God is calling us to something or that the commands that he gives us are harsh, are too difficult.

[27 : 07] And I think the truth is, and the way that we have to respond to that feeling is to remember how good Jesus Christ is, that whatever he calls us to in this life is good.

And the greatest thing we could ever have in this life is to be with him and to know him more. So I'll just close by saying this.

Until next week, until you come back and worship next week or this evening, let's go home, let's read our Bibles, let's worship God, but let's keep asking the Holy Spirit to show us what we can't see for ourselves, which is how good God is and what he's done for us.

And let's let that be the reason for change in our lives. Let me pray. Heavenly Father, we praise you for your goodness and your kindness to us.

And we could speak so long and talk in so many different ways about what you've done for us in the gospel, but we pray this morning that you would create in our hearts a desire to know you more so that even on our best days we know that we haven't come to the end of your goodness, but that we've only just begun.

[28 : 26] We ask all this in your sun's day this morning. I know. Our final song this morning is from the Sing Songs, Psalm 116.

So let's join together and worship.... As long as I shall live, he will teach her to hear me when I pray.
The courts of death grids and entangled me, above me, him the anguish of the grave.
With grief and trouble I was overcome.
Then on the name of God I called, Lord, say, The Lord our God is kind and full of grace.
[30 : 25] Old righteous man, compassionate, risky, The Lord protects all those of childlike faith.
When I was in great need, he rescued me.
Rest, O my soul, God has been good to you.
For you, O Lord, hath saved me so from death.
I need from stumbling and my eyes from tears, That I may live for you while I now breath.
[31 : 46] Hear now these words from 1 Corinthians. May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with
you. Love, be with you all, and Christ Jesus, Amen.