

Knowledge of God

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[0 : 00] Well, again, let me welcome you to Church of the Advent, to the Brooklyn Parish community. A year ago, this community launched, and not without much effort and prayer and sacrifice.

A number of you here have been a part of Advent for years, and you know the time that it took, and you know the sacrifice, you know the cost, the impact on our community.

And so what we're here to do today is to remember that, to acknowledge it, and then also to give thanks for the fruit that has come from that sacrifice.

The Christian life is full of death and resurrection. And so we have experienced death at Advent, and then we have begun to taste together the glory of resurrection that always follows because of Jesus Christ.

And so we're here to celebrate that. It's a wonderful opportunity to be together. And we've been studying for the last couple of weeks the book of Colossians, and I'm really excited about this passage here because I think as we gather together all in this place, this is a fantastically appropriate passage for us to look at.

[1 : 16] It's in the first chapter of Paul's letter to the Christians, the Colossian Christians, and it's verses 9 to 14. And this is Paul thinking about this church that he's heard about.

You know, like many of you in Columbia Heights, you heard about this community launching in Brooklyn, but you never have seen it until now. So Paul has heard about this community launching in Colossians, but Paul's actually never met these people.

He's just heard about their faith. And so Paul says, As I've heard about you, and as I've heard about your faith, from the moment I first heard, I have not ceased to pray for you.

I hope that's true of us. I hope that here in Brooklyn we never cease to pray for Columbia Heights. I hope that in Columbia Heights we never cease to pray for Brooklyn, even if they're people we've never met.

I also hope that this is true for our prayers for churches all through this city and all around the world, that we would never cease to pray for God's church.

[2 : 17] And what does Paul pray? Well, that's the great part. He prays that the whole church, them and us, would be filled with the knowledge of God.

What a fantastic prayer. I want to focus on that, and I think it's worth our time, because that concept, being filled with the knowledge of God, that can actually be very tricky and misleading. So what does it mean? And this passage shows us two things. It shows us what it is, what is this knowledge that Paul prays for, and then how do we get it?

Where does it come from? So let's pray as we get started. Our Heavenly Father, we thank you that there was at one time an apostle who never ceased to pray for the church.

We thank you for the love and the faithfulness represented in that. But more so, we thank you for your son Jesus, because we know that even now, as he sits in the throne of heaven, he prays for us.

[3 : 23] Lord, your word says he never stops praying for us. And so we know that the content of his prayer is reflected in the content of Paul's prayer, that we would be filled with the knowledge of you.

So Lord, help us to see through your written word what that means, and help us ultimately to encounter your living word in your son Jesus Christ. And it's in his name that we pray. Amen. So filled with the knowledge of God, what is that? What does it mean? Let me give you some context about the Colossian Christians. This is a relatively young church, young congregation, not just in age, but also in spiritual maturity.

They're newer believers. They're young. They're excited about their faith, but they're wanting more. Paul has sent an emissary, a representative, to plant this church, Epaphroditus, to share the gospel, and he's been their minister, and the churches begin to grow, and they've received the gospel.

And as Dan preached on last week, Paul says, because the gospel has the power to save, and because you have received the gospel, and you've been saved, therefore I pray this prayer for you. [4 : 38] And he knows that the Colossian Christians, they're new, they're young, they're just starting to grow, that they're wanting more. They're wanting to go deep. They're wanting to experience the fullness of their faith.

Some of them are saying, you know, I've been a Christian for a couple of years now, and I thought all my problems would go away. I thought things would get easier. I thought all my needs would be met, that I would be satisfied.

And actually life has gotten harder. And I struggle more. And what's that about? And so they're wondering, is there more to this? Well, conveniently, other teachers have come into the community. And these teachers have said, why yes? There is more. You believe in Jesus, that's great, that's step one. But there are more steps.

There are deeper mysteries. There is a knowledge that we can impart to you, that will radically enhance, your experience of the faith, and will unlock the full potential, of the Christian life.

[5 : 46] Do you want that? Yes, I do. We'll come right this way. I'm going to give a brief talk, and then my books will be for sale in the lobby. And this is what's happening.

These false teachers are coming in. And the knowledge that they offer is a certain kind of knowledge. See, in the Greek, there are two words for knowledge. The first is the word *gnosis*, from which we get Gnosticism.

And this teaching later, in the coming centuries, will give rise to something called Gnosticism.

There's Gnostic knowledge, which is an abstract knowledge, an intellectual knowledge.

Gnosis is ideas, it's theories, right? So that's *gnosis* knowledge, head knowledge. But then there's another word for knowledge, *epinosis*.

And *epinosis* means a practical, personal knowledge, that can only come through lived experience. So *gnosis* is abstract knowledge. *Epinosis* is personal knowledge that comes through lived experience.

[6 : 50] Well, these teachers are offering the first kind of knowledge. *Gnosis* knowledge, deeper mysteries, new ideas, new concepts, new methods, new techniques to unlock the deeper mysteries of the Christian faith.

And I would stop and say, I don't think that much has changed between then and now. Right?

Post-enlightenment, ever since the enlightenment sort of enthroned human reason, humanity's intellectual capacity has been elevated to the highest levels.

Descartes, I think, therefore I am, our ability to think and understand has been made primary. And now we live in a culture that is oversaturated with *gnosis*, knowledge, with content, with ideas, with theories and methods, abstract content.

And this isn't just in the spiritual world. We have Netflix. We have Hulu. We have all of our favorite podcasts. There are now an almost infinite array of podcasts out there.

Sermon recordings, almost an infinite number of those. TED Talks, the Christian version of TED, the Q Conference, just finished this past weekend.

[8 : 09] Right? More content is now going out on the internet. There's an enormous amount of content. And we have this access to consume as much of it as we possibly want.

All of this *gnosis* that we can just drink in. Right? And you say, well, what's the problem with that? And I would say, nothing. Nothing. I love that stuff too.

I have my favorite podcasts. I have my favorite preachers that I listen to. I have my favorite TED Talks. I have all of the things that I love to consume during the week. The sources of *gnosis* knowledge.

I love it as much as you do. So there's absolutely no problem with this at all. Unless you make the mistake of thinking that that will lead to spiritual growth.

That's where we go wrong. If I drink all of this in all week. That somehow that will make me grow. That's the danger. Actually, I believe this is one of the greatest threats crippling Christians in our culture today.

[9 : 17] That we believe people to be, as the philosopher James K.A. Smith says, giant bobbleheads. You know, tiny little body. Enormous head.

Right? And if we can just open the head up and then dump all of this knowledge in, that somehow that will result in growth and transformation and maturity.

But people aren't bobbleheads. And the result, according to theologian Marva Dawn, is that people have been habituated to, quote, a low information action ratio.

People are accustomed to learning good ideas and then doing nothing about them. Right? That's a great idea. That's an amazing concept.

That would be a wonderful way to live. Alright, I'm done. Right? And we have this list of favorite podcasts. So, this approach, what it actually does, is create a bunch of people who have a lot of head knowledge, but they live as functional atheists.

[10 : 25] They have an enormous amount of head knowledge. But their lifestyle is functional atheism. There's no connection.

Right? And that's why Paul makes it clear here that his desire, his unceasing prayer, is not that they would get more head knowledge. That's not the word he uses. He doesn't say, you need to learn more.

He prays that they would be filled with epinosis. personal, experiential knowledge. Knowledge that can only come through lived experience.

Gnosis versus epinosis. So, think about the neighborhood that you live in right now. Or maybe the neighborhood that you grew up in. There are two ways to know that neighborhood.

The first is to get out a map. Right? You can get out a map and you can do that from anywhere. Get out a map, look at all the streets, memorize the map, you know that neighborhood on one level.

[11 : 26] That's gnosis. But the other way to know that neighborhood is to live there. Is to walk the streets every day. Is to take in the smells and the unique sounds and the sights and the landmarks and meet the people and get to know the families and the issues that are facing that neighborhood.

That's another way of knowing that neighborhood. And what Paul is saying is that our doctrine is a lot like a map. We need it.

We need to know how things fit together. It's very important. But Christianity ultimately is not meant to be learned so much as inhabited.

The Christian faith is meant to be inhabited. You have to move in. You have to live there. You have to walk the streets of faith with your own two feet.

So if that's what Paul is praying for then how do we get it? What does that mean? And if we look at this passage that's what he's talking about. He says, And so from the day we've heard we've not ceased to pray for you asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding.

[12 : 44] So I'm asking that you would be filled with the knowledge of his will. Why? So as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord fully pleasing to him bearing fruit in every good work.

Okay, so I want you to know and understand the map. I want you to know the will of God and be filled with the understanding and the wisdom that comes from knowing the will of God so that you can then begin to walk in a manner that is pleasing to him in a manner where you begin to bear genuine kingdom fruit.

Why? Well, look what it says. Bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.

You see how this works? You learn God's will and then you begin to do and to live out God's will and only through that do you come to a deeper knowledge of God. I want you to move in.

I want you to walk the streets. I want you to trip and fall and stumble and get up and learn your way around. Life in the kingdom. And through that you will gain that deeper knowledge.

[13 : 49] It's not going to come from these books. It's not going to come from these cults of personality, these ideas, these methodologies. It's going to come when you walk those streets with your own two feet.

Right? So, gnosis, head knowledge, is important but it's meant to be converted into epinosis. It's meant to be converted into personal, practical, lived experience.

Let me give you an example. Back in 2008, Michael Phelps' diet made news. He's an Olympic swimmer. Right? He was at the peak of performance in 2008.

Why was his breakfast newsworthy? Well, you tell me. I'll tell you what it was. Three fried egg sandwiches with cheese, tomatoes, fried onions, and mayo. Then a five egg omelet. Then a bowl of grits. Then three slices of French toast. Then three pancakes with chocolate chips. Do you know the total caloric content of that breakfast?

[14 : 53] 4,000 calories. That's twice the recommended amount for a human male. Right? And then he would do the same thing for lunch and the same thing for dinner.

So, every day around 10,000 to 12,000 calories. Now, you probably remember this. Michael Phelps can do that. Why? Because his body takes that caloric content into his body and it converts those calories into energy.

And the guy's swimming like 26 hours a day. So, he can do that. He's spending thousands of calories. Right? His metabolism is off the charts.

Right? So, he can do that because the calories get converted into energy. If I did that, this may be a huge surprise. My activity level is not as high as that.

And if I did that, it would literally puff me up. Why? Because my body wouldn't convert those calories into energy. And what happens if your calories don't get converted into energy?

[15 : 58] What does your body do? Well, I might need this later. I don't need it now, but I might need it down the road. So, we're just going to convert this into fat. And we're going to put it over here next to the belly button.

And then down the road, if we need it, we'll remember where it is and we'll come back and then we'll get it out and use it. Right? And so, in the same way, Paul says that for Christians, gaining gnosis knowledge is like taking in calories.

You're taking in calories. Right? And these calories, this gnosis, is meant to be converted immediately into loving, active obedience. And if not, what happens?

It makes us fat. It makes us fat. Spiritually fat. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 8, gnosis knowledge can make us puffed up.

Right? Spiritually fat. And by that, what does he mean? Well, he means conceited. Right? Conceited. Look at the big brain on Brad.

[17 : 04] Look how much he knows. Right? Look how much he's memorized. Look how much he understands. He's a great teacher. He's a great preacher. I love his books. But we can become spiritually fat.

Right? Because we do the same thing. We take in this knowledge. This is great. This is an awesome idea. I don't really have any need for it right now. I'm just going to put it over here. And maybe down the road, I'll have a use for it. But it's here.

It's in the file. Right? And we get fat. We get puffed up. The files get huge. But we never convert them. So this is what John Calvin meant when he said that all true knowledge of God is born out of obedience.

Born out of obedience. So let me give you some examples of this. One quick example. You're doing it right now. Our liturgy is a great way to begin to see this happen.

Liturgy is a fantastic way to see this happen. Why? Because when we come here and we stand and we kneel and we raise our hands and we call and we respond and we pray these colics and we enter into this liturgy, we're actually embodying our faith.

[18 : 11] Do you know that? That's the purpose of liturgy. We're embodying our faith. We're doing with our bodies things that represent what we believe. It's connecting epinosis and gnosis.

Do you know another great way to do that? The sacraments. The sacraments are like a bridge between gnosis and epinosis. Right?

I know that I need the grace of Jesus Christ. But there's something else that happens when I actually come up and I extend my hands and somebody places a physical manifestation of the grace of Jesus Christ into my hand.

And I take that. I take literally the manifestation of Jesus' once and for all sacrifice for me and I take it into my body. I'm bridging gnosis and epinosis.

It's becoming tangible to me. That's why we do it every week. Baptism, the same thing. Right? So our liturgy and sacraments do this but beyond that we're talking about daily faithfulness.

[19 : 18] Right? Listen. We all know gnosis that we are called to resist temptation. We all know that. But we don't actually know what that means until we've tried to do it.

And I love C.S. Lewis in Mere Christianity. He says, A silly idea is current that good people do not know what temptation means. That's an obvious lie.

Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is. That's epinosis. Epinosis. A man who gives in to temptation after five minutes simply does not know what it would have been like an hour later.

And he says, That's why bad people in one sense know very little about badness. Because they've lived a sheltered life by always giving in. Right? You can know that you're called to resist temptation but only after an hour, two hours, a day, a week of resisting do you really come to know in the sense of walking the streets of faith, what that actually means, the deeper knowledge begins to come.

Right? Another example. You can know theologically that you're called to forgive. Yes, God has forgiven me. I know I'm called to forgive others. Right? Every week we get together we pass the peace.

[20 : 35] Right? To ensure that there's forgiveness and unity in our midst. But we don't know anything about God's forgiveness until we actually have to forgive someone ourselves.

Until you look at the blood and the guts and the destruction and the damage that comes because somebody else has done something horrendously wrong to you. And every cell in your body is screaming for justice, for retribution, for payback, at least for an acknowledgement of the wrong. And it doesn't come. And you have to decide. This person has not repented. They've not acknowledged it. And you have to decide. Am I going to forgive this person?

Not because of what they've done, but because of what Jesus has done or not. And if you do, it means wading into, up to your neck, the blood and the guts and the injustice.

And it means taking that cup of pain and drinking it down and asking for nothing. No repayment. No retribution.

[21 : 44] Nothing in return. The reason we do that, why? Because Jesus drank the cup of pain. Right? He didn't let it pass from his lips. But you don't know that in your bones until you do it.

Until you're laying awake wrestling with the injustice of it. Wrestling with the anger and the hurt and the unfairness of it. Then you're beginning to understand how Jesus felt in Gethsemane.

Right? We know that we are called to give sacrificially but you don't understand what that means. I don't understand until my tithing, my giving, my generosity means that I have to rearrange my budget.

That I can't do the things that I want to do over here because this is a priority for me. Right? I'll give you an example from my own life of a way that this began to happen.

In John 15 12, what's the verse say? Very famous verse. Love one another as I have loved you. A new commandment I give you. Love one another as I have loved you.

[22 : 47] Jesus is saying in the same way that I have loved you, I want you to go out and love other people. I know that verse. Gnosis. I love that verse.

I've memorized it. I had it written on my wall. I've studied that verse in the Greek. Have you?

Probably two-thirds of you are like, yep, I have. I learned Greek in elementary school. D.C. Well, I have too.

And yet, I never really understood it. I didn't know I didn't understand it, but I didn't really understand it. Until I was in seminary, watch out, and a bunch of guys, and I, six other guys, and some of you know this story, we moved in and our vision was to have this intentional community in Salem, Massachusetts, north of Boston.

And we're living there and our intention, our desire was to love the neighborhood as Christ has loved us. We want to love our neighbors, right? Core Christian ethic, right? And we notice this man from day to day as we're living there, we notice this man that's in our neighborhood and everybody in the neighborhood knows this guy and calls him shuffles.

[24 : 02] Because he would walk like this, he would sort of shuffle. And most of the time we would see this man digging through dumpsters near our house. And so we started to get to know this man and get to know his story and it turns out he has Parkinson's and that's why he can't walk.

He walks like this. And we were filled with pity and compassion and we met and we prayed and we said we need to let this guy move in. We need to take care of him. We can't let him stay out there. We need to love him as Christ loves us.

And then we let Al move into our house and we gave him a bedroom and a couple of us bunked together and we gave him a room and we began to try to take care of him. And we find out that Al not only does he have Parkinson's but he's addicted to crack.

We found that out a long time in. We found that out because things started disappearing. And at first it was small things and then it was bigger things and it was things like TVs and laptops. We began to realize we're not that disorganized. Something's happening. And of course Al was stealing stuff to buy drugs. And then came the realization very early on that Al had because of his Parkinson's and because he wasn't getting adequate treatment he would lock up at night. [25 : 13] He would go completely rigid unable to move. This is a problem because he would defecate on himself. So what we had to do is we had to set up a call schedule. We figured seven guys seven nights of the week. We bought a doorbell at Home Depot.

An electronic doorbell. And we installed the button side in his room next to his bed. And we would pass the receiving end off. So one night a week one of the roommates would have the other end of the doorbell next to their bed and when Al needed to use the potty he would hit the doorbell. It would be three in the morning and your doorbell sound would go off and you'd have to go in and let Al use the bathroom and clean him off. What was interesting about this experience went on for a year and a half.

What was interesting is that all that compassion, all that love, all that pity, all that theology of Jesus loves me and I'm going to extend this love, that evaporated in about a week.

And what was left was just pure obedience. There was nothing fulfilling about it, there was nothing satisfying about it, there was no spiritual high that came when you're getting back in your bed at four in the morning, no sense of being closer to God, just pure obedience.

[26 : 35] And I have to say many, many, many nights I deeply resented, deeply resented Al. I didn't go in there with charity in my heart, I didn't go in there with joy, right?

I just went in there angry and wanting to get it over with as soon as possible. In other words, I failed miserably. In all the ways that I thought I was called to love, I failed.

Most of the time I just wanted him out of the house, if I can be totally honest. I just wanted him gone because it made life so hard. And yet over time, something began to happen.

A shift began to happen in me. I think it was the Holy Spirit beginning to show me myself in Al before a holy God.

I began to see myself before Jesus. Not as the one who's coming to Jesus, which is what I thought. I wasn't the person coming to Jesus and pointing to Al and saying, look at all the things that I've done and all the ways that I've loved him just like you've loved me.

[27 : 37] See what a good job I've done? I realized that spiritually I was far worse off than Al. He's maybe addicted to crack, but I was far worse.

All of my hardcore idolatrous addictions to comfort and convenience and my timeline and my priorities and my desire for sleep and my wanting to use my free time in my own ways and all of those things stood out in stark contrast because those are all the things that I wanted more than I wanted to love Al.

Right? And then go beyond that. Right? Al may have been stealing this, that, or the other things. Most of those things insurance could replace. Right?

But I had been stealing from God my whole life. I had been living as though all my stuff and my body and my time, but that's all mine and that God gets a part of it, but I get most of it.

Instead of recognizing that none of it belongs to me, it all belongs to God, I'm called to use it in ways that reflect His heart and His priorities and His values. That I've been stealing from God by living in His world and ignoring Him.

[28 : 50] Right? And just like Al would sometimes lock up and be unable to move, that spiritually I was utterly paralyzed. Apart from God, I was completely paralyzed.

I could do nothing. And my heart began to break. And I think for the first time I began to take a few steps toward understanding the vast gulf of difference between the way we love and the way God loves.

because I would go in there and sheerly out of obedience I would grumble and I would plod my way through this commitment that we had made.

But Jesus never even blinked. Jesus every single moment of our lives is joyfully pouring love and grace and joy into our lives.

Even though we're stealing from Him, even though we're hopelessly addicted to idols, even though we're utterly helpless and dependent on Him, it fills Him with joy. When that doorbell alarm goes off and He can come in and pour His life into ours, that's the greatest thing for Him.

[30 : 08] Because He loves us. And once I began to realize that love and I began to look at my love, I think I took a step toward understanding what love really is.

I think I began to take a step from gnosis to epinosis, right? So I could go on and on and on but the point that I'm trying to make is this, that only when I tried to obey God's command to love and failed was I able to take a step toward knowing God's love the way Paul prays we would.

only when I tried and failed that I really began to take a step in that direction. And of course, this is why Paul goes on to say what he does in verses 11 to 14.

Once we try to obey and you know this, many of you know this, once you try to obey, you immediately become aware of your need for power and endurance with patience.

You need power. You go in there and you say, I can't do this. Help me do this. You need power to endure with patience. You become more thankful about the certainty you have in your inheritance because you think, oh my goodness, if this depended on me, I would be hopeless.

[31 : 23] But it doesn't. Jesus promised me the inheritance before I did anything. And then ultimately, the certainty that we are now members of the kingdom of God's beloved son, when you look at your actions and you think, this is exactly how a person in the domain of darkness would act.

And scripture says, no, no, no. Remember, even though it may feel that way, God has transferred you to the kingdom of his beloved son. It may not feel like it, but you're a citizen there.

And all of that begins to click home. The more we try to follow Jesus and the more we fail, the more assurance we draw from knowing that God has once and for all made that citizenship transfer.

And I think, this is my last point, that this is what Christianity brings and offers that is unique among the religions and the worldviews filling our culture.

The unique thing about Christianity is this. All religions talk about knowing more about God. You can do this, that, or the other, and you will know the divine more. But only Christianity talks about all that God has done to know us.

[32 : 33] Marvin Olasky is a journalist. He writes this, Muslims say Allah is omniscient, but his supposed pronouncements in the Quran show no epinosis.

Christians can have confidence in the God we trust because he is truly omniscient with both gnosis and epinosis, with both abstract knowledge and personal experience.

He says, we rejoice at Christmas that God knows our frames because he came to earth and suffered all the indignities of babyhood and eventually experienced the ultimate in pain when he atoned for our sins.

So what this is saying is this, we can, with confidence, seek to follow Jesus and fail and know that in those failures we will not be cast away. Why?

Through those things we will actually come to know God more deeply through our failures and that's because God has become one of us. He knows our humanness, not just epinosis, not a detached divine being looking down on these little human servants but rather because he's one of us because right now in the throne of heaven sits a human body.

[33 : 55] He's experienced it firsthand. As the apostle John says, we love because God first loved us but if we're reading this correctly what this is also saying is that we can know God because he first knew us by becoming one of us.

Let's pray. Our Father in heaven as we are gathered here as your church body, we are sinners. We know that in all of the things you call us to do we struggle and even in our best we fall short and yet we know that our hope is not in those successes and victories Lord but rather in you coming to know us by walking the streets of our lives by living day and night as one of us feeling what we feel and because of that we know that as we celebrate your resurrection we're actually seeing a preview of our own bodies that we will be raised like you given bodies like yours that never perish and Lord in the light of that hope we do pray for the answer to Paul's unceasing prayer that we would be filled with the knowledge of you even as you are filled with the knowledge of us and that that would give us confidence to follow you boldly knowing that it will draw us ever deeper into your heart because that is what we were made to experience we pray this in your son's holy name amen