

“That We May Know” 2023 Life Sunday Materials

SERMON

(Note: This sermon, by Prof. em Forrest Bivens, was originally preached for the CLR National Convention, October 15, 2022. Some changes, particularly to the introduction, will be necessary if it is preached in a parish or other setting. The particular focus is on Colossians 2:2.)

Colossians 2:2 / 1:28-2:4

That We May Know (and Share) Maturity in Christ

- 1. Expect strenuous effort**
- 2. Expect significant impact**

Colossians 1:28-2:4 ²⁸ He [Christ] is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so **that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ.** ²⁹ To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me. I want you to know how hard I am contending for you and for those at Laodicea, and for all who have not met me personally. ² My goal is that they may be encouraged in heart and united in love, **so that they may have the full riches of complete understanding, in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ,** ³ in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. ⁴ I tell you this so that no one may deceive you by fine-sounding arguments.

Introduction: *Why have you come here today?* To renew friendships and spend time with friends? Because you give thanks to God for the gift of life for yourself and others and want to express you are pro-life? Or is it *Continental breakfast and delicious catered boxed lunch plus snacks and refreshments throughout the day* as promised? I suspect all this is true—plus something else: **you expect to learn.** The convention theme is “**That We May Know**” and this implies or promises sharing knowledge. In writing the letter to the Colossians (and Laodiceans) St. Paul made the promise and then kept that promise. His main focus was Christ, more specifically the “mystery” of Christ and “maturity” in Christ. Let’s make that our starting point.

That We May Know (and Share) Maturity in Christ

- 3. Expect strenuous effort**
- 4. Expect significant impact**

Part 1: Expect strenuous effort in knowing & sharing Christ

- 1.** Paul uses distinct words to bring out how he and Timothy **“strenuously” labor.** Listen: **[Our goal is] that we may present everyone fully mature in Christ. To this end I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me. I want you to know how hard I am contending for you and for those at Laodicea.** Because Paul was currently imprisoned in Rome (over 1,300 miles away) the hard work certainly included prayers as well as communicating through writings and messengers. It involved serious, passionate intercession. What he wrote of Epaphras was true of himself. He was **“always striving in prayer for them.”** Strenuous labor!
- 2. What made it so hard?** One factor was the **thorough approach** to sharing knowledge the apostles took. Listen: **He [Christ] is the one we proclaim, admonishing and teaching**

everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone **fully** mature in Christ. Another factor was **the subject matter**. Listen: “**the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. [and so we teach]. . . in order that they may know the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.** The Bible definition of “mystery” is information/knowledge human beings would never know unless it is revealed or made known to them by God. It does not mean that there is anything incomprehensible when it was made known, but that we’d never come up with it on our own, through independent study. *It doesn’t stem from human thinking or express human values, or agree with human likes & dislikes.* That made it hard to share at times.

3. And there was **opposition and religious competition** to contend with. The religious and philosophical system called “**Gnosticism**” was seeking the attention and allegiance of the Colossians and Laodiceans. Here the emphasis was less on God and information revealed by God and more on knowledge *gained through human investigation and centered in human activity*. No wonder Paul and Timothy needed strenuous effort to serve God and the believers! Because of indwelling sin, the temptations of Satan, presence of false teachers who trouble our faith, and fill people with doubts and perplexities, our hearts need comfort and encouragement every day.
4. **And today** in the arena of contention between “pro-life” and “pro-choice,” the value system contending for our attention & allegiance are parallel. The word “**radical**” is often used in political attacks on TV, suggesting that *pro-life positions seek a thorough or extreme social change of value system*. That’s actually very true or accurate. At the center of the struggle was **Jesus Christ as God, Creator and Savior**. Gnostics devalued Christ by denying he is true God, much less than Creator and Lord of the universe, and inadequate as Savior without human efforts added. Pro-choice positions ultimately deny Christ’s as Creator & Owner of human bodies and lives, Lord & Determiner of Right and Wrong, and dismiss the need or value of him as Savior and Deliverer since we are equipped to form and further our own destiny and value system. **It’s all about Christ!** Essentially, this revealed truth is not mere historical information, much less a collection of rules & regulations, but a living and glorious Person who fulfills the deepest hopes of humanity and is the source of new and eternal life for all his people. **Watching one sunflower** follow the sun is amazing. **Watching hundreds in unison** follow the sun is more so. Sunflowers continue tracking the sun’s direction after the sun is set. They are always oriented in the direction of the sun. Their unity is totally dependent on their relationship to the sun. The parallel image and truth is our focusing on the Son, gaining maturity in Christ and sharpening their skill to share this truth.

Transition: It would be understandable if we then conceded that our changes of “success” or substantial influence in society & culture would be minimal. Paul & Timothy did not agree.

Part 2: Expect significant Impact in knowing and sharing Christ

1. Listen: **I strenuously contend with all the energy Christ so powerfully works in me.** Paul saw himself as a spokesperson of Christ who brought astounding energy to equip him to make a difference. Elsewhere he famously wrote: **I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. . . We preach Christ crucified . . . Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God.”** This reality changes things in knowing & sharing Christ. **Compare ads for pickup trucks.** The power is in the vehicle. All the boat or trailer has to do is be hooked onto the truck. **The power for your Christian life is not in you. The power for your Christian life is Christ under the hood; it's “Christ in you, the hope of glory.”**

2. **Christ satisfies; Christ meets people’s needs.** He is “the mystery of God, namely, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. At the heart of this wisdom and knowledge is the affirmation of the forgiveness of sins, assurances of our heavenly citizenship, and the comfort of knowing he as well as his promises accompany us step by step through life. Here is also *the key to new lives, reconciliation with God for those who currently stumbled and failed to cherish life as God’s gift to them or others.* To use physics terminology: **Christ “displaces” lesser philosophies.** There are different ways to remove water from a glass. Turn it upside down. Empty it. But another way is using the principle of displacement. Fill the glass with sand or gravel, **things of greater density or substance**, and the water is forced out. The same idea prevails with ideas and values in our hearts and minds. When we are brought to faith in Jesus, the substance of his Deity, immense love, the unconditional gospel of pardon and peace with God displace the lesser values we had, never leaving us empty when the old departs. We want this for others too.

3. **Another advantage we have is thankfulness as attitude:** Immediately after this text Paul wrote **So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.** The 2nd-century apologist Aristides wrote to the Roman emperor Antonius Pius this description of Christians: (1) if any person from among them passed from this world the Christians would **rejoice and give thanks to God.** (2) When a child was born to Christian parents, **they would praise God.** (3) If it died in infancy, the parents **thanked God even more** because the child would be one who had passed without falling prey to sin.

Conclusion: **Why are we here today? Learning** is a part of it. Another: **Maintaining focus on the main issue, namely Christ.** Maturity in Christ. Writer Pam Sneddon, taking a photography class, chose her 6-year-old daughter as her photo subject and asked her to sit on a hillside. **Nearby was an apple tree in full bloom.** Pam just couldn't resist. She gave the tree a prominent place in the picture. Pam was surprised when her instructor pointed out how the apple tree **distracted from her primary focus, the little girl.** *"See how it catches the eye,"* the instructor said. *"It competes with your subject. You need to choose one subject and leave the other out."* This applies to more than good photography skills. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we must center our attention on Him. Like amateur photographers, we are often attracted to the "apple trees in

full bloom"— hobbies, friends, family, or work. **We strive to do better: to know . . . to share . . . to enjoy Maturity in Christ, in whom is found all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.**