

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(February 12, 2012)

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: God is...

(Studies in the nature and character of our God)

Knowing the God Who Is

(Philippians 3:1-11)

Study #7

Introduction: Knowing and KNOWING...

Knowing someTHING is significantly different (and simpler) than knowing someONE.

I pretty much knew my old gray 1980 Pontiac Gran Safari station wagon inside and out. Over the years that we owned it, I added a roof rack and a third seat, replaced dozens of parts and helped it limp to about 225,000 miles.

I know Lost Maples State Natural Area, up in the Texas Hill Country near Utopia. I've hiked it in the middle of blazing summers, with kids on my back, and in the wintertime. It's my favorite nearby retreat spot and I've walked the trails dozens of times and spent the night at just about every one of its campsites.

I know Scout, our dog, but not as well as I know Lost Maples. She's a black lab/???? mix. But while she's sweet as can be, she's way more unpredictable than my old car and more complex than Lost Maples.

And I know my wife, Kathy. I should, you'd think. After all, we've been married since 1979.

We've raised a family together, cared for each other throughout all of our adult lives, been together through thick and thin and have experienced at least some of the "better and worse" we promised when it all began (June 16th, to be precise, in case you didn't think I remembered!).

But my knowledge of my wife is nowhere near as complete or certain as is my knowledge of places I know well or pets we have had.

That's due to no fault of hers, or, frankly, mine. It is due to the fact that she is a person. After all these years, Kathy retains an amazing capacity to surprise me. There are layers of complexity and unpredictability that never cease to amaze and inspire and intrigue me.

A car, a park, a dog, a person. Each more complex than the one before. But the more complex the object of our study, the more rewarding it is to get to know. Imagine knowing an infinite, eternal ineffable Being...

This morning we come to the final installment of our series of reflections on the God who is. We have looked at just a few of the facets of His nature and His ways and we have seen that He is a holy and loving, all-knowing and ever-present Judge.

Last Sunday we were reminded that because of who He is - and specifically because of who He is TO US! - we can and we should by all means pray. Walking through Jesus' parable of the stingy friend at midnight (Luke 11) assured us of that.

Last Sunday's time in God's word ended up being both an encouragement to pray and an exhortation to pray. Because of who God is, pray!

Other messages in this series have been informational and exhortational. There has been a "what" component (God is omniscient; God is omnipresent; God is holy; God is love; God is a Judge) and a "so what" component.

Today's message is not primarily informational - although if you learn something, I'm fine with that. I have put these thoughts together to set before each of us a vision of what a life before God might become - and to provide what I hope will be a helpful diagnostic to gauge how we're doing.

Today we are going to think about what it might look like for us to grow in our knowledge of God.

If anything, God is an infinitely more complex Being than any place, pet, or person we will ever know. He is also invisible, spiritual, nonmaterial and inscrutable! So getting to know Him will undoubtedly be different than getting to know anything or anyone else.

But it is not unusual for us to speak about becoming Christians in terms of relationship. We enter into a “relationship with God” through faith in Christ. When we trust Jesus we have “come to know the Lord.”

Even our (admittedly long) memory verse for the month of February speaks of “knowing the Lord.”

***[Hosea 6:3] So let us know, let us press on to know the LORD.
His going forth is as certain as the dawn;
And He will come to us like the rain,
Like the spring rain watering the earth.”***

When Hosea wrote those words, he was not urging the Jews of his day to ace a theology exam. He was urging them to something else, something more intimate and relational.

To know the Lord is to understand Him, so knowing God includes information. But knowing the Lord also implies some experience with Him, a relational component.

And so, to get a vision for growing in our knowledge of God and to even get a handle on what that might mean, we’re turning to Paul’s letter to the Philippian church.

Proving himself a true preacher, Paul begins the third chapter of his letter with the word “***Finally...***” and then proceeds to write the second half of his letter.

His first words out of the chute are striking.

Reminders on the Way to the Main Thing (vv. 1-3)

Rejoice in the Lord! (v. 1a)

[1a] Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord.

What irony! Here is the great apostle, under house arrest in Rome, urging his FREE brothers and sisters in Philippi to rejoice.

“Come on, guys, cheer up. Life may be tough, but Jesus is Lord! I’m in prison, but He’s still on the throne. We may be losing now, but because of Jesus’ victory over death - we win in the end!”

This is like a cancer patient urging his hospital visitors to rejoice, or the family whose apartment complex just went up in smoke telling residents of The Dominion to rejoice.

Right off the bat Paul wants us to know that there is something about KNOWING Jesus Christ that makes a deep, abiding joy a very real possibility, no matter what is going on in or around us.¹

I know some of you here today who have suffered deep tragedies and passed through deep valleys and have continued on walking with Jesus experiencing a joyful sadness that doesn’t fit the definition of “happiness.”

That kind of joy is only possible as we “***rejoice IN THE LORD.***”

Now, when Paul told the Philippians to “***rejoice in the Lord***” he was repeating himself. That’s OK.

It’s possible that Paul was in his 50’s when he wrote this letter. People in their 50’s repeat themselves all the time (that’s because we can’t remember what we just said, or why we just went to the refrigerator).

Well, he continues repeating himself and repeats a warning he had evidently given to them previously.

¹ We think of Stephen, the very first Christian martyr, whose story is recorded in the book of Acts. As the enemies of the message of Jesus stoned him to death, the Bible says that his face shone with radiant joy.

Final Warning - BEWARE (vv. 1b-2)

[1b]...To write the same things again is no trouble to me, and it is a safeguard for you. [2] Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision²

Paul's not talking about dogs like our dog, Scout. He is warning us against legalistic trouble-makers who would trip us up as we walk with Jesus.

These dogs are wolves in sheep's clothing who would derail us if we let them. They claim to be the real deal, spiritually speaking, but they're not. With these guys, the deeper you go, the shallower they get.

So watch out for anybody who would try to make you feel guilty for not doing exactly what they do, or what they say you should do. Run from anyone who puts more stress on outward conformity to a code of conduct than they do on an inner change of heart.

Of course it's not that Christianity is opposed to behavioral change. It is just that in Jesus there is an order to the change. It is inward - then outward. We are aiming for change from the inside out.

And when change occurs it is because we recognize that we are now simply not who we once were.

Final Identity - THIS is who you really are (v. 3)

[3] for we are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh

That phrase "*put no confidence in the flesh*" grabs our attention and piques our curiosity. What does Paul mean by that?

² These people were either extreme Judaizers (a group that may have included proselytized Gentiles) or antagonistic Jews. The Judaizers plagued Paul and his converts constantly (and before that, of course, Jesus), confused the Gospel, and added works of the law to faith in Christ for salvation.

Playing the "Personal Achievement" Game (vv. 4-6)

In a word, he means that he's not counting on anything in him to commend himself to God. He doesn't think that his gifts and abilities have anything to do with his standing before God.

It is worth noting though, that if he was going to play the "personal achievement" game, he would probably win...

Paul's Physical Pedigree (vv. 4-5a)

[4] although I myself might have confidence even in the flesh. If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: [5] circumcised the eighth day³, of the nation of Israel⁴, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews

Very few Jews of his day could claim so much to boast about in terms of spiritual heritage. His was a pedigree most Jews of the first century would have died for.

But, Paul didn't choose his ancestry any more than you or I chose ours. So, if that was a source of pride for him, it wasn't pride for what he had personally accomplished.

He did accomplish a lot, personally, though.

Paul's Spiritual Pedigree (5b-6)

[5]...as to the Law, a Pharisee; [6] as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless.

Paul was a Pharisee (v. 5e)

He was a Pharisee. 'Nuff said. Had you met a Pharisee on the street in the first century you would likely have been impressed that you had just met one of the most righteous, most godly people you had ever been around.

³ Note Gen. 17:12; 21:4; Lev. 12:3

⁴ Cf. Ephesians 2:11-12, and the disadvantages of being born a Gentile.

Now Paul might have been one of those hypocritical Pharisees Jesus talked about (see Matthew 23 - or, he might NOT have been...) But there was no greater aspiration for an energetic young Jew of Paul's day who wanted to make an impact for God than to be a Pharisee. If Paul had wanted to boast in the flesh, he could have easily done so on the basis of his being a card-carrying Pharisee.

And, he was zealous for God.

Paul was a persecutor of the church (v. 6a)

It's a good thing to be zealous for God. Jesus was zealous for God. King David was zealous for God.

Yet one of the scariest things for a person in our world to hear today are the words, "He's zealous." We say that and people hear, "He's a zealot, a fanatic." And we all know what fanatics do...

"Zeal" is what motivates the Taliban and Al Qaeda. Zeal has led to the deaths of millions in Germany, the Soviet Union, Cambodia, and Uganda. Zeal prompted the Crusades and the Inquisition. In the wrong hands, zeal is a terrifying thing.

At one point in his life, Paul's zeal moved him to try and put an end to the Christian movement, killing and imprisoning followers of Jesus. No question about it, Paul was zealous - and THAT would have been something to boast about.

AND he was obedient to the Mosaic Law's demands.

Paul was blameless with respect to the righteousness found in the Law (v. 6b)

Throw an accusing stone at Paul for unrighteous behavior and it would have bounced off. The charges would not have stuck. Paul lived an outwardly moral life. He really did.⁵

⁵ This is an especially remarkable claim when we consider the minutiae and trivialities observed under strict Pharisaic legislation. But, Paul claims to have had a perfectly clear conscience, and there is no good reason to doubt that he did.

And that's Paul, before he came to faith in Christ. His lineage was traceable to Abraham. He was as zealous for God and as righteous as anybody you could find.

Before he came to Christ, Paul believed that all these things would commend him to God. But coming to faith in Christ turned his world - and those beliefs - upside down.

So, What's REALLY Important? (vv. 7-11)

Evaluating Former Gains as Losses (vv. 7-8)

[7] But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ.⁶ [8] More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ

Paul lumped together everything he has just mentioned (vv. 4-6) as his hope for gain and now reckons them as less than zero, now that he knows Christ. He considered it better to know Christ than to have anything else - or everything else - in the world.

Paul had the world on a string. His career path was unobstructed. Advancement was certain. And he turned on his heel, and walked away from it all.

And when it came to letting us know what was really important in life, he didn't mince words.

The Greek word that my English version translates "rubbish" is a strong word. The word is *skubala* in Greek.

It's not a terribly polite word. "*Rubbish*" is an OK translation, but it often has a more precise meaning than that.

⁶ The initial re-evaluation occurred on the Damascus Road, when he was confronted by the resurrected Lord Jesus. But for Paul, the determination to consider "gains" as "losses" was not just a once and for all action taken in the past. It was an ongoing action that took place every day of his life.

It can refer to that which is thrown to the dogs. More typically, it refers to that which is rejected by a dog. Those of us who have pets know skubala well. It's what we scoop out of our backyards and take to the trash.⁷

When Paul says that he counts the great things he has lost as “rubbish” (or “dung”) he means that they are no big deal to him.

His physical pedigree meant nothing anymore. His standing in the Jewish community, zip. His reputation as a Pharisee was irrelevant. Even his righteous lifestyle was beside the point.

He knew that he had tons of reasons to put confidence in the flesh - if that was the game he was wanting to play. But he wasn't playing that game anymore. He had discovered that life is found in Jesus. Period. Nothing else is worth skubala!⁸

So, according to Paul, what IS important? Listen.

Knowing Exactly What We Want in Life (vv. 9-11)

The righteousness that comes through faith in Christ. (v. 9)

[9] and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith

Paul had spent the first part of his life pursuing an entirely different way of achieving a right standing before God - the way of **works**. He thought that he could commend himself to God by what he did.

But, he came to see that eternal salvation can never come by Law. A person can only stand justified before God on the basis of faith in Jesus.

What about you? Are you hoping that you have done enough good things to commend yourself to God? That path didn't work for Paul, and it won't work for you, either.

Are you counting on gaining God's acceptance and approval on the basis of your gains in this life? Sorry. Salvation comes to us as a free gift from God - or it doesn't come to us at all.

You can make a killing on Wall Street, give yourself to raising a great family, rise to the top of the heap at work, be well thought of by all the neighbors, and make straight A's at school.

But, take it from Paul.

If you haven't come, trusting Jesus, to the foot of the cross to have your slate wiped clean, if you haven't been made a new creation in Jesus through faith, you're leaning your ladder against the wrong wall.

So, will you come to Jesus today? Will you trust the One who loves you best to save your eternal soul? He's got His arms outstretched to receive you when you come, simply believing.

When you do, you will enter into a relationship with God. You will have come to know God! And that is only the beginning.

For the rest of your life you will have the incredible opportunity to passionately pursue a life-changing relationship with God and to come to know Him better and better and better.

That was Paul's story and that is our story, too. What he writes next give voice to our most fervent heart cry.

The knowledge of Christ (vv. 10-11)

[10] that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; [11] in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Paul didn't just want to know about the Lord. He wanted to know the Lord - and that is a distinction worth making.

Lots and lots of people before me have observed that it is altogether possible to know a great deal about God without gaining much in the way of real knowledge of the Lord.

⁷ Eugene Peterson in The Message has an honest translation. He renders *skubala* “dog dung.”

⁸ Mt. 16:26

So, how can you tell? How would I know if I am coming to know the Lord better? Is it possible for me to discern if all I'm really doing is just learning more and more interesting factoids about God? Or am I actually growing in my true knowledge of God?

Conclusion:

To try to get a handle on this question I am going to lean on an older, wiser brother to provide what I think is a pretty great set of diagnostic questions designed to help us discern.

That older, wiser brother is J.I. Packer, and I'm returning to his masterpiece, Knowing God (can you tell I'm trying to revive interest in this awesome book?). Drawing from Scripture, Packer insists that those who know God (in the sense that we are talking about today) are marked by four traits.⁹

They have great thoughts about God. They find great contentment in God. They have great courage for God. They have great energy for God.

Let's evaluate what we know of the life of the apostle Paul against these diagnostics and then measure ourselves against the same standards.

Great thoughts about God

First, did Paul have great thoughts about God? He sure did! Just listen to him as he praises God.

[Romans 11:33] Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and unfathomable His ways! [34] For WHO HAS KNOWN THE MIND OF THE LORD, OR WHO BECAME HIS COUNSELOR? [35] Or WHO HAS FIRST GIVEN TO HIM THAT IT MIGHT BE PAID BACK TO HIM AGAIN? [36] For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.¹⁰

⁹ Those who have read Knowing God, will recognize that much of my thoughts spring from his chapter entitled, "The People Who Know Their God."

¹⁰ See also Ephesians 1:18-23 and Ephesians 3:14-21.

Diagnostic #1: Do thoughts bombard you, from time to time, of the enormity of God's power, His love, His holiness? Are you frequently (ever?) simply blown away by the realization of His grandeur, His grace, His faithfulness?

This would be one measure of your growing knowledge of God.

Great contentment in God

Second, did the Apostle Paul find contentment in God? I'll say! Listen to what he has to say in Philippians, chapter 4.

[Philippians 4:10] But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned before, but you lacked opportunity. [11] Not that I speak from want, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. [12] I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. [13] I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.

That's contentment in EVERYTHING. Earlier in the letter he talked about his experience in prison and seemed not the least bit bothered that he was there. He only rejoiced that there was opportunity to share Christ while handcuffed to two soldiers.

And as we've seen today, Paul was content to have lost much of what most of us would consider valuable (or necessary). Prestige, popularity, possessions. It was all gone, but he was OK with that because he knew God.

Diagnostic #2: Can you say, at the end of the day, "Well, that was a tough day, but it's all good because I know God."?

Great courage for God

And what about courage for God? It seems silly to even pose the question, "Was Paul courageous for God?" Of course he was!

Just watch him as he dusts himself off after having been stoned nearly to death just outside the city of Lystra to travel the very next day to preach the Gospel to the people of Derbe. Listen as he fearlessly proclaims Jesus to the Jewish Sanhedrin and to Roman governors.

Diagnostic #3: When faced with an opportunity to speak about Jesus to a friend, are you more passionate about sharing with them or more riddled with fear about what they might think of you?

Great energy for God

And energy for God? Paul had that in spades.

He was relentless in pushing the work of God forward. He traveled thousands and thousands of miles, planted scores of churches, evangelized in the hardest places imaginable, stayed up late, served in every way he could, and worked his fingers to the bone when necessary making tents so as to not be a burden on the churches he served.

Diagnostic #4: The nearly default answer to the question, “*How’s it going?*” these days is, “*I’m tired.*” I’ve almost come to expect that answer - and maybe people who ask me “the question” have come to expect that answer from me, too! OK. We’re tired. But does something begin to stir in you when you hear of an opportunity to serve God? Do energy levels begin to rise when you find open doors for sharing Jesus or for giving money or when you hear about fresh opportunities to serve, worship, or help others in Jesus’ Name?

By these four diagnostics - **thoughts, contentment, courage, energy** - I believe we can assess the degree to which we have come to know God, the degree to which we are getting to know Him better.

And if, by these diagnostics any of us discover that we have not yet come to much of an experiential knowledge of God, what should we do?

Why, nurture a growing relationship with God by energetically serving Him, courageously following Him, practicing contentment in what He has provided you, and reflecting on what you know to be true of God in praise and worship!

But by all means, let’s all do all we can to nurture a growing relationship with God.

About ten years ago I wrote thoughtful letters to two men I deeply respect and admire. One of those letters was written to Gordon MacDonald and the other went to Eugene Peterson.

Surprisingly to me, they both wrote back. I have their letters in my files. Their replies were thoughtful and personal. They weren’t form letters.

While neither one of them actually invited me to write again, their friendliness and openness in correspondence left the door wide open for me to reply to either of their replies to me. I never wrote either of them back.

As I stand before you this morning, I want you to know that I count among the great regrets of my life my choices to not write back to these two men. I didn’t take a chance at establishing an actual relationship with these guys.

Whenever we are wanting to relate to someone who is famous, widely known, a celebrity, the onus is on them to open the door. I’ll never get to know George Clooney, Tim Duncan, Gabrielle Giffords, or Tim Tebow if they don’t allow it. Gordon MacDonald and Eugene Peterson opened the door to me and I didn’t walk through.

This morning, there are lots and lots of famous people who aren’t opening the door to us for relationship. But the almighty God of the universe has opened the door wide through His Son, Jesus.

Would to God that every one of us here this morning would take advantage of that open door and passionately pursue a life-changing relationship with Him for all we’re worth.

***[Hosea 6:3] So let us know, let us press on to know the LORD.
His going forth is as certain as the dawn;
And He will come to us like the rain,
Like the spring rain watering the earth.***