

November 30, 2014, Title “Faith and Hope”, text, Colossians 1:3-14
Slide #1: “Advent 2014”, title “Faith and Hope”, text, Colossians 1:3-14

Question 1: What is your favorite Christmas memory? What do you most enjoy in the Christmas Season?

Slide #2: Would a religious revival turn people’s hearts away from creature comforts, parties, amusements and worldly delights? Should it?

Does our expectation of a revival include creature comforts, parties, amusements and worldly delights?

What does the life of a ‘sold out’ Christian look like?

Question 2: What does the life of a “sold out to Christ” Christian look like?

Slide #3: The Christmas Advent is only the first. The Second Advent is the return of Christ in glory. Acts 1:9-11

We are called to live by faith in both Advents
Mark 13:26-27

Slide #4: The promises:

1. Of a son to Eve
2. Universal blessings to the world’s families
3. To David of a greater Son
4. Of a child to be born to a virgin
5. A king to arrive on a donkey’s colt

Slide #5: People put form ceremony, rituals or habits as well as good works ahead of pursuing a personal relationship with the Lord.

This is putting the externals of life as substitutes for the internals of the soul
1 Samuel 15:22-23. The condition of one’s heart is primary.

Question 3: In what ways might Christians be tempted to substitute the externals of the faith for the internal realities of spiritual life?

Slide #6: Naaman the Syrian and Elisha the prophet (2 Kings 5:17-19).

It was not Naaman’s presence in the idols temple that was primary, but the presence of a true faith in Naaman’s heart.

But heart easily deceives itself and hides evil

Slide #7: 1 Corinthians 10:14-22

Naaman’s faith was the openness of his heart to the Lord’s sustaining and protecting presence even in the demon house of Rimmon

Question 4: What do you think would be most challenging for Naaman after returning to Syria?

Slide #8: Colossians 1:3-9, things we can know

1. That a person has faith
2. A person’s love for others, especially Christians

Question 5: How might love for Christians differ from love for people in general, or does it?

Slide #9: True faith must be motivated by personal hope centered in heaven (Colossians 3:1-4). It is contrasted with hopes to be realized within the scope of our earthly lives, and having a fruitful knowledge of the gospel nurturing an observable faith in Jesus and love for Christians with its “end-point” being the realities of heaven

Question 6: “A real or fruitful knowledge of the gospel is one which brings about an observable faith in Jesus and love for other Christians which finds its endpoint or final rationale in the promised realities of heaven.” Is this helpful or not and why?

Slide #10: Which of our “holiday hopes” go beyond present delights and satisfactions? Which of our “holiday hopes” have nothing to do with heaven or Jesus the King of Heaven?

Slide #11: Evidences of a true faith

1. An interest in the gospel as a message from God calling us to act in ways that says God’s love is here
2. A world view that subsumes world centered gains under a heightened anticipation of heaven centered blessings
3. Loosening of the grip of worldly ambitions, comforts and pleasures

Question 7: Does it seem to you that the way you and your family celebrate Christmas is heaven centered or earth centered?

Slide #12: A greater and more thank-filled enjoyment of God’s world-centered blessings!
Philippians 4:10-13

Slide #13: “...*be filled with the knowledge of God’s will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding.*”
“...*walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.*”

Question 8: Why is it hard for Christians to accept/believe that they are “...filled with the knowledge of God’s will...” and have “...all spiritual wisdom and understanding”?

Slide #14: So great is our dread of self-righteousness that we simply cannot receive what Paul offers to us

1. We have the written Word of God
2. We have the indwelling Spirit
3. We have the local community of faith, the local church

Question # 9: The following “resources” for living the faith were listed: the written Word of God, the indwelling Spirit, the local community of faith. How do each of these most effectively help you in your Christian life?

Slide #15: Offer a gift of prayer to someone this Christmas, that they will receive from the Lord “all spiritual wisdom and understanding”?

Question 10: if you could have one wish this Christmas, what would it be?

Advent 2014: I have been a pastor now for almost 40 years. After 40 years you finally ask yourself, “What can I possibly say about Christmas?” Yet every single year the Lord opens up new dimensions of His truth which are good for His people. So this year as I prayed and thought about it as I often do on the sabbatical for study that you graciously allow me to take in the fall I felt the Lord led me to this particular passage: Colossians 3-14. We will get to that in just a few moments.

Christmas is, as I am sure all of us in this room realize, the number one retail sales event of the year. On average retail outlets will sell in the neighborhood of 60% of their goods over [the Christmas Season]. It is not unusual that if a retail outlet is not able to have a good Christmas season they will go under. So you can imagine what that means for those who are in marketing. It means that they put out a huge amount of effort to get us to buy stuff. That is what they do because they are so dependent upon this particular portion of the year for breaking even and making a profit. The commercial emphasis on Christmas, as I am sure all of us realize, has succeeded and has succeeded overwhelmingly. Perhaps the nation in the world that celebrates Christmas more lavishly than any other is Japan. There are almost no Christians in Japan, but they love Christmas. Christmas continues to be a major holiday throughout Europe yet the active Christian population in most of Europe is less than 5%.

Well what about us? Christians in America have reached the point where we consider it a victory to have our advertisers use the word “Christmas” instead of “Happy Holidays”. That is a victory of sorts, but it is a rather thin victory. You might ask the question whether we are really happy that they take the name of Christ and use it for their major retail marketing schemes? Think about that. We should be under no illusion, of course, that the last thing that the majority of merchandizers want for the Christmas season would be something in the neighborhood of a religious revival. In other words by splashing the name of Jesus, the birth of Jesus, the name of Christ all over the countryside... what if it led to a major moving of the Holy Spirit and a profound transformation of the population? Would such an event turn people’s minds away from, as I put it in the slide, from creature comforts, parties, amusements and delights? This is what Christmas by and large is about.

I pondered that and I wondered [if] in our own thinking – and this is what leads on to our reflections in Colossians 1 – in our own thinking does our expectation of a revival, a profound moving of the Holy Spirit in our lives, does that expectation exclude or include creature comforts, parties, amusements and worldly delights? Which rolls you down another step to say this: what does a sold out to Christ Christian look like? What does that mean? I think all of us in this, I am assuming, would like to think of ourselves as 100% sold out to Christ. But I am not certain that we are clear in our minds as to what that would mean or how it would be, or act, what it would look like. I think that makes a difference. The underlying question is, what is God doing with us? Culturally “being saved” means escaping the consequences of sin in terms of eternal judgment. So by and large being saved in our culture is something that God does for us. That is true. But when we read the scriptures, when we begin to take time to reflect upon and begin to take in we begin to understand that God does not intend simply to do something for us, but He intends to do something to us and with us. That really is what Colossians 1 is about as well as the rest of that letter.

So my thought is for Christians to rightly participate in Advent we need to be keyed in to the purposes of God. It is important to realize, as I think most of us do, that there are two Advents, not just one. Of course the Christmas Advent is the first Advent. That is what this is all about: the birth of Jesus Christ. There is another for which the faithful wait. The Second Advent is the return of Christ in glory. What He comes back to do, according to scripture, is to establish His in person rule upon the face of the earth. An essential verse to focus on is Acts 1:9-11 which talks about the return or the second advent of Jesus. This is what we are told by Luke who authored that book. (**Acts 1:9-11**), “*And when he had said these things, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went – [can’t you imagine what that would have been like? What if right now I...that would be something, wouldn’t it? You know I am a fanatic about*

the “Lord of the Rings.” I love that story and I really enjoyed the movie. At one point Frodo is there in the Inn at Bree and by accident he slips on the powerful ring and he disappears! Let me ask, how many would stare at the pulpit if I suddenly disappeared? Probably some of you would cheer, but that is another matter entirely. We can imagine the disciples are looking and [saying within themselves] what is going on? Then Luke goes on and [writes] – *behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.’*” So some day there will be the second Advent, the return of Jesus Christ.

Essentially we are called to live by faith in both the first and the second advents. We live our lives between those two. We live by faith in what God has done, and we live by faith in what God intends to do. We accept as it were the tension of living between these two defining events. Jesus Himself said this as recorded in Mark 13:26-27. *“And then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory, and then the Son of Man will send out His angels and gather His elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.”* That is hope. It addresses, I think, a mistake that we often make as Christians. That mistake is the anticipation that somehow by our efforts we can so alter the quality of life on the face of the earth now that it will already be like heaven, but that will not be. We are called to faith and faith is hope. Put it this way: hope is faith praying, casting itself into the future and trusting that God’s hands will catch you there and sustain you.

To say this is to actually stir the fires of controversy amongst Christians who tend to have sometimes to have false expectations. There was considerable confusion about the first coming, the first advent of Jesus or of the Messiah. There was uncertainty and there was confusion. The Old Testament has scattered all through it a rather abundant body of evidence for the first advent. You might recall there was a promise given to Eve that she would have a son that would crush the head of the serpent at the very beginning of the scriptures. Later on there was the promise of the universal blessing to all the families upon the face of the earth. You and I who have been here studying Genesis remember the promise given to Abraham that, “. . .through you all the families of the earth will be blessed,” an amazing promise. Later on there was the promise to David that he would have a greater Son. He was a great ruler but the One to come would rule forever on the throne that [David] established. What a remarkable promise. There again was the promise of a child to be born of a virgin. This was given by the prophet Isaiah. And again there was the promise given by the prophet Zechariah that the king would come riding into Jerusalem, riding upon the colt of a donkey and greeted with “Hosanna, hosanna, glory to God in the highest.”

The Jews understandably preferred to see this first advent as the fulfillment of all their dreams, dreams that focused on national redemption and glory. Over time the Jews, as we know, turned to maintaining the signs and symbols, the rites and rituals of the covenant as proof of their loyalty and service to God. In this they demonstrated a common, indeed an only too common tendency for people to put form and ceremony, ritual, habits, good works ahead of the substance of faith. What is the substance of faith? The substance of faith is pursuing a personal relationship with God. So what they fell into is the common error of putting the emphasis on the externals and ignoring the internals, how I present myself outwardly as opposed to who I am inwardly in my relationship with God. They knew better than to do this, of course, and so do we. We know that observing ceremonies and rituals and traditions all by itself will simply not cut it with the God whom we serve. We know that in our heads, but we don’t act on that with any degree of consistency. It comes up very early in the life of Israel. Samuel, first of the great prophets, speaking of the behavior of the first the kings, not David but Saul, made this comment. Samuel said, *“Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold to obey is better than sacrifice and to listen than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of divination and presumption as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the Word of the Lord – he said to Saul – the Lord has rejected you from being king.”* Looking at that, understanding what was happening there in the argument that was going on between Saul the king and Samuel the prophet in terms of whether or not Saul had fulfilled God’s purposes, Samuel is pointing out that rebellion is like divination and presumption is like or the same thing as iniquity or

idolatry, what he is saying is that the issue here is the condition of your heart, and that is true even if you do what God says you are to do. It is still a matter of the heart and recognizing that you do what you do out of personal love and faith in God, so you are hope filled as you enter into God’s presence and worship Him there.

God gives us a remarkable illustration of the distinction between externals and internals, which every time I read it blows me away. You will find it, and you might want to note this down, in 2 Kings 5:17-19. Listen to what we read here, probably written down for us by Jeremiah. *“Then Naaman said [to Elisha] – you need to know that Naaman was the Syrian general who was cured of leprosy by the prophet Elisha. Here is the conversation [following that healing] ‘...please let there be given to your servant two mule loads of earth, for from now on your servant will not offer burnt offering or sacrifice to any god but the Lord. In this matter may the Lord pardon your servant: when my master goes into the house of Rimmon to worship there – this was worshiping an idol, a demon is what Paul would say – leaning on my arm, and I bow myself in the house of Rimmon, the Lord pardon your servant in this matter.’ [Elisha] said to him, ‘Go in peace.’”* Catch what you just heard. Because of his situation there is no way that Naaman can avoid going into this idolatrous temple and bow down. But in his heart he does not want to bow down. He only wants to worship the Lord God. Elisha says, “Your heart is right; it is well with you.” The heart is what matters. What you believe, what is happening [within], the conversation between you and the Lord God is what matters. Certainly that illustration drives [the point] home with power.

But of course if you think about that, if you reflect on that remarkable situation, there is something else we have to reflect upon. Jeremiah says that the heart is desperately wicked. We don’t like to think of it that way. The heart easily deceives itself and hides evil within itself. Rebellion and presumption are both rather easily hidden beneath the appearance of sincerity and the desire to be a true devotee of God. Sin’s corruption of the heart can indeed be subtle, perhaps even deceiving the sinner as to his or her actual leanings. There is a comment given by Paul at the end of Romans 14. He said, “Blessed is the heart that does not condemn itself by what it approves.” So Naaman’s example there in Second Kings should not be read as a lowering of the bar of faithful observance, certainly not to the effect that it is no matter to God if we worship in the temples of idols any more than we engage in false worship or external forms of worship in the church. Indeed if you look at 1 Corinthians 10:14-22, listen to what Paul here says:

“Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. I speak as to sensible people; judge for yourselves what I say. The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. Consider the people of Israel: are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar? What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything, or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons. You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he?”

When you read these words by Paul you understand that the exhortation to stay away from idolatry is powerful. Don’t go to confusing places; beware of the capacity of the heart to deceive itself. But still it is the heart that matters; it is the condition of the heart that matters. Naaman’s faith was the openness of his heart to the Lord’s sustaining and protecting presence even in a demon house as the house of Rimmon. It was a dangerous place; a place for which he needed the forgiving grace of God. Naaman did not think that he was stronger than the Lord nor that he could fool the Lord through the pretense of faith dressed up in religious activities.

This is the priority of the heart. Just by way of illustration, how do we know the condition of a person’s heart? Can we know it? It is tricky business. I thought about this: what is the contrast, who is the more faithful person? [Is it] the one who carefully attends every worship service including Christmas Eve and if you are Scandinavian – how many Scandinavians are here? – they had a thing called “Ulofa”, it’s a form of torture! You had to get up at 5:00

o'clock on Christmas morning. Of course if you were really Swedes it was because you were up all night, because they can't wait for Santa Christmas morning at night and then they would go and repent – so here you have a person who attends every worship service and they give money to every single charity you can possibly think of: is that person more in tune with God than the guy who decorates his house with ten thousand lights? Well, you don't know, you absolutely don't know because you don't know what is driving them on. You don't know who they are trying to please. You just don't know. Christians are called to faith and hope. We are not called to judging our neighbor. That is a matter we have to take with great seriousness.

But to say that does not mean we are not able to know anything. Here we should turn to Colossians 1:3-14. In Ephesians 4:16 we are told that we are to build one another up in love. How many have built a wall? How many have built a wall while blindfolded? Great fun! To say that we can know nothing about one another would mean that we try and be the church spiritually blindfolded. I am afraid that there are many who interpret the warning to not judge one another to mean to never assume I know anything about the spiritual condition of my brothers and sisters in Christ. Consequently, you might [want to] think about this, much of the life of the church is like blind people carefully not running into one another. Not much happens. But listen now: this is Colossians 1:3-14.

(1:3) “We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, (1:4) since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints, (1:5) because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel., (1:6) which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and increasing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth, (1:7) just as you learned it from Epaphras our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister of Christ on your behalf (1:8) and has made known to us your love in the Spirit.

(1:9) And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, (1:10) so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. (1:11) May you be strengthened with all power according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, (1:12) giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. (1:13) He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, (1:14) in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”

That is a great passage. Perhaps by the end of these four weeks we can all have memorized that passage and we could stand up on the last Sunday in the year and just recite it to God, saying, “Glory be to God for these fantastic promises that have been given to us through His Word.”

What are some things we can know? In Colossians 1:3-14 what are some things that we can know? We can know if someone has a reputation of being a person of faith: a reputation, not their boast, but their reputation. We do know the difference. It is not me saying what a great good guy I am; instead it is my wife saying, “Yes, he doesn't beat me!” A reputation is built on observation by others, [seeing] actions which speak of personal faith in Christ, partially on the sort of doings that prompt others to see you as a person who loves others, especially Christians. These [kinds of actions] are simply written down in the word of God. We are to love strangers, we are to love our enemies, and we are to love the brethren, the brothers and sisters in Christ. Do we do it? If you see somebody doing it, of course you can't read their heart, but you say to yourself, “Ah, I wonder what does prompt them to do this?” That is what Paul is saying.

Each of these Paul qualifies as being motivated by a personal hope centered in heaven. Skip over to Colossians 3:1-4 for just a moment. In Colossians 3:1-4 Paul makes an exhortation saying, “Live like this.” This is what he says: “*If then you have been raised with Christ – meaning you have been born again through faith in Jesus Christ and received the Holy Spirit – seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated the right hand of God. Set your*

minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.” This is hope. To say that is necessarily to say this: hope contrasted with those hopes which are centered on earth, hopes which can be realized within the time frame of our daily lives. How many remember being eight in anticipation of Christmas? How many hoped for things that would be realized by Christmas morning? Well of course! But when you get older you just hope what will be realized by the Christmas feast! Then if you are really old you just hope you have adequate income to pay for everything you spent on Christmas by the end of January. Hope just keeps extending itself out. But all of this is concentrated on things that will be realized now, within the timeframe of our lives upon the face of the earth. Paul says Christians need to be thinking in a different way than just that. They need to think differently.

In verses 3 and 8 Paul makes it clear that a real or fruitful knowledge of the gospel is one which brings about an observable faith in Jesus and love for other Christians, which finds its endpoint or rational in the promised realities of heaven. So how much of what we hope for and pray for and invest in reaches its fulfillment in glory rather than on the 25th of December?

I think that we can see that way we celebrate Christmas is so counterproductive to sincere Christian faith. Nearly all of our holiday hopes have to do with present delights and satisfactions. They have very little to do with Jesus as the King of Heaven. We have to think about that.

Let’s go further: what exactly are we to observe as the lively evidence of a true faith? Many things, perhaps, but amongst them, listening to Paul, would be an interest in the gospel as the message from God that draws or leads people into activities that prompts people to say that the love of God is active in that person’s life. What we want to do is by the end of the Christmas season, by the beginning of the New Year, to take an inventory of our ourselves – this, by the way, is what Advent is about – and reflect on this. The way I am going into Christmas by the end of this year will people have reason to say about me, “Oh my goodness, the love of God was so active in that person!” We know how this works. How many have a relative who is bitter? So just so you get this straight in your head: you pray and you say to God, “Can I buy a gift that will penetrate that bitter heart and reestablish an open relationship between me and [that person]. The argument here is not against buying gifts. That is to misunderstand. The argument – it is not my argument, it is the Spirit of God Who is arguing with us; He says, “Why do you do what you do? What do you hope for as a result of the acts you’ve taken? Are you thinking beyond immediate gratifications to ultimate – the proper Christian term is sanctification, being made holy or “in agreement with the purposes of God?” That is what Paul is wanting us to think about. The frame of reference for these activities and the blessings that result from them would see world-centered gains in the context and anticipation of heaven centered blessings.

Some of you know that my mother-in-law is 97. She is really old! She has made no clear confession of Jesus Christ [as Savior]. So the question becomes, do we want to have her with us in the Lord forever? What can we do to advance to that end? That is the kind of thing that Paul is saying needs to be actively evidenced in our lives. You anticipate that a person who is truly in faith, who is alive in the Holy Spirit would manifest or demonstrate in how they live, how they talk, what they do, a loosening of the grip of worldly ambitions, the grip of worldly comforts and pleasures. These would loosen and one would look instead to other things as the source of personal satisfaction and even of inspiration. You catch a glimpse of this in a marvelous passage, I Corinthians 7:29-31. This is what Paul says: *“This is what I mean...let...those who mourn as though they were not mourning, and those who rejoice as though they were not rejoicing, and those who deal with the world as they had no dealings with it. For the present form of this world is passing away.”* You may have a neighbor who is an absolute pain in the neck, but how long will that pain go on and how long is eternity thereafter? In such a comparison you say, “Whoa, I can put up with this!” in the meanwhile because what is going beyond is incomparably greater. Last week I gave you a couple

of Break Point articles. This is another, though I haven't reproduced it. It describes some Christians in another portion of this country who were puzzling how could they bring the love of God to bear upon the issues? One of the issues they came upon was that there were a lot of single moms on welfare, they were unemployed, on welfare and had nothing to do. They also found there were a lot of untended kids with disabilities. So they figured out a way to get these moms to take care of those kids. By entrusting them with responsibility under the supervision of the church, marvelous things began to happen. Another, a Lutheran church, Lutherans of all things, my goodness; what they did in their community, is they got together with social services and realized there were lots of homeless families. They made an investigation and found out the single greatest burden those families felt was the loss of any self-respect, the loss of self-esteem because they were just out of our culture. What they did was two things: the church began buying run down old homes, they refurbished them so they could be lived in and moved those families in. But that was not the whole of it. They then worked with the families to give them all of life skills: maintaining their budget, developing habits in raising their children, putting their lives together. They have an 80% success rate in moving those families off of welfare and into productive lives where they then raise their children. That is glory to God, folks; that is glory to God. The question that we then face is are we willing to make that kind of investment? See how it works! What were my hopes and dreams, what am I anticipating, what am I longing for. Am I longing for that which will satisfy me or will satisfy me by seeing the grace of God work in some broken person's life and bring them up and out of the trap that keeps them crushed?

That is the sort of thing. There is an irony, I think many in this room know this, there is an irony – I am almost done! – there is an irony here and many of us who have had the privilege of walking with the Lord know this is the effect of grace. The effect of grace in a person's life, the transform work of the gospel in a person's life liberates the souls so that in fact you end up having a greater and more lively, thank-filled enjoyment of God's world-centered blessings. Of course! The prime place to catch this is Philippians 4:1-13, the most frequently misinterpreted verse in the Bible I think, but here is the proper context. Listen, this is Paul saying, *“I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity [he is referring to them sending him money]. Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low [meaning impoverished], and I know how to abound [meaning having plenty of money]. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”* What he means is that regardless of his condition he is able to rejoice and give thanks to God and to take use to the fullest extent whatever his circumstances are. This week – you have to pray for us for I am not as spiritual mature as Paul – this week Nini and I went to [Grand] Junction [Colorado] where our second son now lives. We took Caleb with us and to drive there and back we rented a car, one that actually runs. It was wonderful, it was powerful. We drove on the highway and up the hill and around the corners. Then we came back and got in our car, and I will just say this that we rejoiced greatly in the Chevy Impala and we are making adjustments to the Ford Taurus! That is what we are doing. But you can be content and be glad whether you abound or not. That is what the meaning of that verse is and Paul wants us to understand. He wants any Christian to understand we are not called to live a life of glumness regretting every good thing we have; we are to rejoice in every good thing we have. But our hearts are not to be trapped by them or by wanting them.

Paul also tells the Colossian Christians it is possible for them, he says – notice, this is incredible – to be filled with the knowledge of God's will and to do so with all spiritual wisdom and understanding. What he goes on to say is that these Colossians will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to Him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. Considered soberly, these are great promises, but even more they are remarkable claims. Beloved sometimes I think we program ourselves for failure, or at best mediocrity. I have been a pastor for about 40 years, next year it will be 40. Here is my observation: we have so great a dread of appearing self-righteous that for the most part we cannot receive what Paul says here. We just can't receive it. Who of us will to say as Paul says, that I walk in a manner that is worthy of the Lord? Or, that my life is fully pleasing to

Him. We run and duck. We announce that is not possible. Paul says it is possible. We say it is not possible. But it is possible. It is possible because the Holy Spirit makes it possible. Paul prays for this assurance to develop in the lives of the Colossians. Let us consider for a moment in our day right now what do we have to enable us to lay claim to these words of affirmation. We have the written word of God. That is what we are looking at today. I hope you are also experiencing the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore at this moment you are gathered in community faith which is the local church. We exist to encourage one another – actually what Paul says as I mentioned earlier, to build one another up in the faith, to build one another up in love. These are already things that we have for God has given them to us. The question is whether or not we take advantage of them or do we neglect them?

Here is a suggestion. For this Advent, maybe into the beginning of the [New] Year, what about offering the gift of prayer to someone, especially a continual prayer that they will receive from the Lord all spiritual wisdom and understanding? Just make that your prayer. Tell them you are praying for them, asking that God would do this, that God in fact would enable them to do great things for God and to walk worthy of the calling with which God has called them. What a way to share God's blessings.

Please pray with me: Father in heaven this Advent we ask that You would speak to us, help us to see the world as you intend and ourselves also. Father, [help us] to let Your power and truth to work more powerfully in us so that we become more truly, Father, a people of faith, trusting in both the first and anticipating the second Advent, and therefore being a people of hope, hope in ourselves and hope for those around us. We ask this, our Father, in Jesus' name. Amen.