

Sermon #1,269: John 17:3 (Free Text)
6-11-17, Trinity Sunday, Bethany-Princeton MN

THE TRUE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD

The Text, St. John 17:3. "And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent." Lord, this is Your Word and these are Your words. Sanctify us by the truth Your Word is truth. Dear Lord God, the only true God, One in Three and Three in One: We pray that You would increase in us true knowledge of You and of Your will. Lead us always to seek to know You according to Your Word. There show us that we can know You only by Your grace in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Dear fellow redeemed in Christ: Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

In the confession of sins today, we prayed: "By Your Holy Spirit, increase in us true knowledge of You, and of Your will, and true obedience to Your Word." That is such an excellent prayer. It should be a daily prayer!

It's important to know God, to have the knowledge of God, but this prayer reminds us to ask to have "the *true* knowledge of God." This is so important that here in His prayer to the Father spoken in Gethsemane, Jesus says our salvation depends on it: "**And *this is eternal life, that they may know You.***" Here Jesus says eternal life comes through knowing God.

But we should know what this "knowledge of God" is. It isn't the kind of knowledge that's stored in a library. When we speak of knowledge, usually we're talking about information, getting all the right answers. It isn't even the *deep* knowledge that philosophers are seeking. I spent a long Sunday afternoon in high school at the Trinity University library - ironic name, huh? - reading the great philosopher Descartes, trying to understand his complicated way of proving that God exists. But the knowledge of God is not just knowing that God exists. The devils know that God exists. But this isn't the way of "knowing God" that Jesus is speaking of and hoping for.

The "true knowledge of God" is faith. When Jesus says here, "**that they may know You,**" He is talking about *believing* in God. As a pastor, I don't have a better knowledge of God than you. As a parent, you don't have a

better knowledge of God than your baptized child. A lifelong Christian doesn't have a better knowledge of God than a new Christian. Because the knowledge of God isn't knowing more answers or more Bible information.

The knowledge of God is knowing God the way He wants you to know Him. True knowledge of God is true faith in Him.

There is a way of knowing God that will not lead you to know Him the way He wants you to know Him. It will not give you true faith. This is the way many people imagine that they know God. They "know" God from what they see around them - in nature - and what they may feel or think about God - according to their natural thoughts, their imagination, or what their conscience tells them. This is the *natural knowledge of God* - what you can know of Him on your own. The Bible does speak about this.

The Bible says that everybody knows something about God from observing nature. Romans 1 says that even unbelievers and pagans know God this way: *"What may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown it to them. For since the creation of the world His attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse" (Ro 1:19-20)*. Here the Bible says that everyone "clearly sees" His "invisible attributes." Everyone can see that there is a God who is all-powerful, all-knowing, wise, and merciful. We know God like this too, on our own. We can see how He feeds the sparrows, makes the plants grow, and makes nations rise and fall.

Also the Bible says that everybody knows something about God already in their conscience. Romans 2 says even unbelievers and pagans live according to a basic understanding of right and wrong. It says they *"show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts accusing or else excusing them" (Ro 2:15)*. It says here that the Law - not the laws of men but the moral law of God - is in people's hearts when they are born. This is true for us too. In our conscience we know something about God. We know God's Law on our own, even if we don't always listen and submit to that voice.

So it's true - even the Bible says so - that you can know something about God from nature and from your conscience. But if that's all, then you don't really know God. It isn't the way He wants to be known.

The reason is that this is knowing God only according to the Law, even if it's natural law. It does imply things that the Bible teaches about the Law. Nature tells us that God is greater than us and we will die. Our conscience tells us that we don't measure up, it accuses us before God. But if this is all we know of God, then we can only know a God who will only be mean and hard with us. That is all the law shows us of God. It makes us afraid of Him. Although all this is true – God's anger over sins is real and true – it isn't the true, full picture of God. It isn't how God wants us to know Him.

Here in Jesus' prayer to God the Father, He says that, on their own, people don't know God; He prays "**that they may know You,**" meaning that on their own they don't, not yet. This is Jesus' desire, that all would have true knowledge of God, true faith in Him.

Then Jesus says what the true knowledge of God *is*. "**This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.**" It's a little funny to hear Jesus speak about Himself this way, as if He's talking about someone else, not speaking in grammatical first person but third person. But it's needed, because He is being very specific about who He is. He is "**Jesus Christ, whom [God has] sent.**"

Jesus says very clearly that people *do* know the true God when they know "**Jesus Christ, whom You have sent.**" This isn't just knowing about Jesus. It's knowing Jesus. When you know Jesus, you know God.

If you know God in Jesus, then you can't be afraid of God and you can't think God is going to be hard on you and mean to you. If you know God in Jesus, then you know that God loves you, has compassion for you, will only be kind to you, and only wants to save you.

Now, do you think you could ever imagine such a God? You could expect God to treat you as you deserve to be treated. But God continues to love a creature that always disobeys Him and goes against His wishes. Not only that, but God doesn't make you earn His love, as we would do; He had His only Son die, for you to have His love. We could *never* dream this up or imagine this is how God is. Nor could you know this God by looking at the world around you. Just think of what happens in the world. Mostly stuff that makes you afraid and leaves you dreading what will happen next. You can hardly find a person who will always be patient with you, or who gives

you unconditional love. The world is cold, cruel, and unforgiving. But God *always* loves you, is kind and compassionate to you, and wants to save you.

It should be obvious that we can't know God like this, by nature.

We must have this revealed to us, in order to know God like this. God wants us to know Him this way. He wants us to receive His love. So, in love, God has given us His *revealed* Word, the Holy Bible. The Bible is the "revealed knowledge of God."

What does He reveal in the Bible? Well, certainly He reveals who He is as the one true God: one God in three Persons, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But you can read that in the Bible, and still miss the whole point. You can miss what God wants you to know most of all about Himself.

Just so we don't miss it, Jesus says it: **"This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent."**

What we can't afford to miss is: Jesus. We can only know God as He is, when we know that He sent Jesus, because He loves us. *"God so loved the world, that He gave His only-begotten Son."*

This tells us what to think of the Triune God. What should we know of the Father? That He sent Jesus to save us. What should we know about the Son of God? That He came down and became man to die for our sins. What should we know about the Holy Spirit? That He comes - in Baptism, in the Word, and in the Lord's Supper - to give Jesus to us.

This is knowing God, not by the Law, but by the Gospel. This is knowing God by grace. This is the Gospel of grace. Jesus prays here that all people would know **"Jesus Christ, whom You have sent"** - that is, that all people would know that God the Father sent Jesus. This is grace, God's love for undeserving sinners. In Jesus, we know God's grace. The more we see Jesus, the more we know God's grace, the better we know God.

What should we think about our "knowledge of God?" How do you know God like you should? How do you know God well enough?

It isn't by living such a life of obedience. It isn't by having so strong of a faith. It isn't by having more Bible information in your head. Actually, it is your sinful life, it is your sin, it is your *weakness* of faith, that can help you

to know God as you should. You know God, when you have to go to Jesus' cross. You know God, when you are weak and sad and sorry, and look to Him for grace. This is how to know God: when you come to Jesus' cross.

Many times we come to Jesus' cross at our weakest point. Our repentance is too long in coming. Life has to get pretty bad to bring us there. We can't get over our guilt. We can't get rid of our sadness. We can't find peace. We don't come confidently to the cross. Does it mean we don't know God very well? No - we know Him better than, than we do at other times when life is easy and good and we live as if we don't need Him very much.

Pastors have a hard time learning this, so do parents and anyone with spiritual authority: you feel that you should be stronger in faith, you should be leading the way, and you should not have such a hard time with grace and faith. You think you should *know* better. When will we learn that we can only know God by His grace?! Jesus' cross gives us faith. Jesus' cross is what gives confidence, what removes guilt, what comforts in sadness, what gives the peace that the world cannot give.

We are all there together, at the foot of the cross. The ground is level there. There you and your children are equals. There people of all nations, all races, all education levels and all stations in life are equals. There the rich and the mighty are equals with the poor, the homeless, and the downtrodden. We all can only know God by counting on His grace, on Jesus' blood, to take away our sins and give us life in heaven.

This is the true knowledge of God: faith in Jesus Christ as our Savior. This is the work of the Holy Trinity: to give us His grace. It is the Father's desire to give this to us, it was Jesus' work - His blood and sweat - that earned it for us, it's the Spirit's delight always to give this to us: God's grace in Jesus.

Eternal Triune Lord,
Let all the hosts above,
Let all the sons of men record,
And dwell upon, Thy love. (TLH #241 v. 4) Amen!