

# Cross-Cultural Education Journal



Discussions of Interest to Immigrants

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## Faith Lutheran Church

### The Meaning of Seeking Knowledge

*“Welcome one  
another as  
Christ welcomed  
you, for the  
Glory of God.”*

Romans 15:7

#### Introduction

What does it mean to seek knowledge? To the ancients, both in the West and the East, seeking knowledge meant to gain understanding of the world and how people could improve their lives and enhance their morality. Motivations for many people have changed somewhat in modern times.

#### Definition of Knowledge

The simplest definition of knowledge is that it is the accumulation of facts and information. Moreover, it is the body of truth and principles acquired by mankind, which is constantly expanding and growing. Having knowledge is the condition of knowing something through reflection, learned association or experience. Often, the words *knowledge* and *wisdom* are used interchangeably; however, the latter is actually more a refinement of knowledge through applying understanding and judgment.

#### Ancient Western Pursuits of Knowledge

Three early Western philosophers often mentioned in studies of knowledge are the Greeks, Socrates (470-399 BC), Plato (427-347 BC), and Aristotle (384-322

BC). All three set much of the groundwork for the pursuit of knowledge in Western culture.

Socrates devoted much of his early life to acquiring practical and useful knowledge, as well as scientific theories surrounding order and chaos. He destroyed the illusion that humans comprehend the world perfectly and pointed out that we must accept our own ignorance if we are to expand the universe of knowledge available to us. He said “I know nothing except the fact of my ignorance.” He believed that “the only good is knowledge and the only evil is ignorance.” By relying on critical reasoning and commitment to truth, Socrates set the standard for all subsequent Western philosophy.

In 399 BC, a judge in Athens, Greece, found Socrates to be guilty of corrupting the youth and interfering with the religion of the city. Socrates was sentenced to death. Friends encouraged him to flee, but he believed to defy the judgment would undermine authority. Accepting his fate with grace, Socrates drank hemlock and died in the company of his friends and followers. His last words were “The hour of departure has arrived, and we go our ways --- I to die and you



**SOCRATES**

to live. Which is better, only God knows.”

**Plato** focused on gathering knowledge through observation and reasoning. He was a man of the world, an experienced soldier, widely traveled, and had



**PLATO**

close contacts with many of the leading men of science and government of his day. Through his observations, he contributed greatly to the mathematical sciences. His thoughts on the limits of his knowledge were similar to those of Socrates. He stated: “I am the wisest man in Athens because I know I don’t know. I am only singularly ignorant. The rest of the citizens are twice ignorant. They think they know, but they still don’t know.”

Plato founded *Plato’s Academy*, which flourished until 529 AD, when it was closed by the Roman Emperor Justinian who claimed it was a pagan establishment, even though that was not true. It had survived for 900 years and was one of the greatest among those focused on philosophical learning.

**Aristotle** devoted his life to the pursuit of knowledge through logical reasoning and philosophical investigations. It is believed that Aristotle wrote 150 philosophical treatises. The 30 that have survived touch on an enormous range of knowledge regarding philosophical problems, from biology and physics to morals and politics.



**ARISTOTLE**

Aristotle believed that knowledge was something that once attained, could not easily be taken away and remained important throughout one’s life. He said: “Education is the best provision for old age.” When he was asked how much educated men were superior to those uneducated, Aristotle answered, “As much as the living are to the dead.”

### Ancient Chinese Pursuits of Knowledge

**Confucius** (551-479 BC) preceded Socrates by al-

most 100 years. Today, people in both the East and the West know of, and quote, Confucius. However, because ancient societies were more insular than



**CONFUCIUS**

today, it is doubtful that Socrates knew of him. Confucius primarily focused on morality and doing what is right. He believed in obedience, but felt that true obedience is to refuse to obey any orders to do what is morally wrong.

Confucius was influenced somewhat by the founder of Taoism, Lao Tzu (570?-490? BC). However, Taoism is focused on nature rather than knowledge, and is considered by some to be anti-social, tending toward anarchy. Confucius believed that man’s nature is to be social. He tailored his instruction to individual students, planting seeds of thought, and then discussing ideas. A quote from Xun Zi (310-237 BC), a follower of Confucius, is “Tell me and I’ll forget. Show me and I’ll remember. Involve me and I’ll understand.”

One particular quote from Confucius still applies to gaining knowledge (or wisdom). “By three methods we may learn wisdom: First by reflection, which is noblest; second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest.” Like the Western philosophers mentioned above, he believed “Real knowledge is to know the extent of our ignorance.”

Confucius has been followed by disciples who collected his sayings. Perhaps the most famous of these collections is the *Lun yu* (“Conversations”) published in 1190 AD by the neo-Confucian philosopher, Chu Hsi. Confucius’s love of learning is reflected in his opening statement in the *Lun yu* “To learn and relearn again; isn’t it a great pleasure?” Confucius’s pursuit of knowledge started early; he is quoted as saying “At 15 I set my heart on learning.” Primary motives for his learning were to exercise his mind and to seek a higher moral plane of thought.

Confucius also saw knowledge as a way to gain political power. However, his main motivation was to improve the way rulers treated people. Some disci-

ples who have followed emphasize obtaining knowledge to have power over people. Confucius's teachings have been distorted by them as shown in more recent sayings such as "gain knowledge, gain power," or "everything is in a lower class except seeking knowledge." Nevertheless, Confucius still inspires people in both the East and the West.

### **Modern American Pursuits of Knowledge**

Most people seek knowledge to enable them to make a better living. However, many students in America and elsewhere also are driven by dreams of contributing to society. Students of engineering, the physical sciences and the arts hope to create better lives for people. Students studying for medical professions, teaching and jobs in the social sciences are usually driven by the desire to help others. Craftsmen generally take pride in producing useful items for others. Being able to earn more and make a better living is important, but most people in America would not enter a profession or trade just for that reason. The typical American does not want to be poor, but having a satisfying life is very important.

Many American parents promote experiential learning processes for their children. Often children are encouraged to try things and learn by failures. A saying among many Americans is that "a bought lesson is better than a taught lesson." This could be considered the Confucian third way of learning "by experience, which is bitterest." Most Americans are not aware that Confucius coined this similar saying 2500 years ago.

### **Modern Chinese Pursuits of Knowledge**

Rather than relying on experiential learning techniques, many Chinese and other Asians memorize what they read in textbooks. A Chinese professor has declared that some present-day Chinese don't always have an older traditional grounding in morality and are somewhat selfish, focusing much on monetary motives to gain knowledge. He cites that current tradition calls for them to care only for themselves and a saying tells them they should "only shovel the snow in front of their own house, they do not care if their neighbor's roof is falling from too much snow."

Often immigrants are interested in what they study, but the primary driver is to make a better living and to glorify their family. Personal needs and desires of the immigrants are frequently secondary. They tend to develop technical abilities without the social and communication skills that are needed in America. Many are under stress, worrying about maintaining their immigration status and jobs. Most men prefer to have their wives work also, to maintain their income and living style. Marital and family problems are common.

Other immigrants who are more entrepreneurial are generally happier. They do not emphasize formal education and academic degrees. Their pursuits of knowledge are to learn what it takes to have their own successful business, rather than to be employed by a company. They develop networks with other like-minded people and consider this the best way to seek knowledge. Some of them call the formally educated people "book dummies." Some Americans share this opinion.

Immigrants often feel at a disadvantage to their American counterparts. They see Americans having family support and easier access to help if they lose a job. While this may be true, immigrants can have advantages they frequently are not aware of. They often see opportunities in America that those born here take for granted and do not see.

### **Comparison of Western and Chinese Pursuits of Knowledge with the Bible**

Great philosophers of ancient times in both West and East had common traits in their search for knowledge. Both groups were aware of their ignorance and desired to know more. Both pursued knowledge for its own sake and for the betterment of mankind. Moral applications were primary considerations in the use of their knowledge.

Today, differences between East and West result from political and cultural changes over the millennia. Many Americans desire knowledge to better serve their fellow man and society; money is important, but secondary. Many immigrants have the same drives, but often the search for wealth and associated prestige can override their motivations, depend-

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*Faithful people,  
raising up people of Faith*

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About Faith Lutheran Church:

Faith Lutheran Church is a caring people, who support one another's spiritual growth and who reach out to the community with Christ's love.

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ing on their native culture.

The Bible provides us with knowledge of God's truths and moral direction. (Bible references here are from the New International Version.) Knowledge is first mentioned in the Bible in Genesis 2:9 where it speaks of "...the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" which became the source of original sin when Adam and Eve partook of its fruit, thus violating God's command and losing their innocence.

King Solomon is considered to have been the wisest man in the world. He preceded Confucius, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle by several centuries, ruling Israel for 40 years (approximately 970-930 BC) and writing most of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes and Song of Songs in the Bible. In 2 Chronicles 1:10, it documents that Solomon asked of God, "Give me wisdom and knowledge that I may lead this people..." Solomon did not ask for his own gain, so God responded in 2 Chronicles 1:12: "...And I will also give you wealth, riches and honor." In Proverbs 1:7, Solomon wrote "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, but fools despise wisdom and discipline."

Throughout the Bible we are told of the knowledge that God wants us to have, for example, 1 Timothy

2:4 states that God "...wants all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of [his] truth." In John 8:32, Jesus, relating to God's truth, states "...the truth will set you free." Socrates had similar beliefs from a secular point of view; he believed that self-mastery was the path to independence and true freedom, and he taught that this grew with knowledge.

An example of moral direction from the Bible is found in Luke 6:31 where Jesus says "Do to others as you would have them do to you." This parallels Confucius's Golden Rule "Do not impose on others what you do not wish for yourself." Jesus, as a man, probably had not heard of Confucius, but such knowledge is what God imparts through reflection (Confucius's noblest means to seek knowledge) to good people everywhere.

### Conclusions

Ancient philosophers were humbly aware of their ignorance, and considered seeking knowledge to be noble and meaningful. To many modern people it still is; however, most of us seek knowledge now to better our lives through more fruitful employment. Still, seeking knowledge can be beneficial to all. The Bible can give us knowledge to guide our lives.