

"Whatever You Do..."

Colossians 3:16-17

¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. ¹⁷ And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (ESV)

If you've been here for the past few weeks, you'll remember that I've been likening the Book of Colossians to the television show, "What Not to Wear." In the television show someone writes a letter about their mother saying, "She's a fashion nightmare. Can you help her out?" Then the consultants come in and tell them, "What you're wearing is hideous. Here's what you should be wearing." Then they'll spend the rest of the show sort of accessorizing with everything else. In the Book of Colossians, that's basically what Paul does with the Colossians and ultimately with us. He comes in and says, "Here's what you're wearing now and it's hideous. It's your sin, it's your own self-righteousness which is as filthy rags. It's no good. What you should be wearing is the righteousness of Jesus. That's the only thing that can make you look good in the eyes of God. The righteousness of Jesus can be had by faith, just by trusting in His work for you on the cross. Then, as soon as he nails that point down he begins to accessorize. He tells us what not to wear from our old wardrobe: anger, wrath, malice, sexual immorality, idolatry. The reason we shouldn't wear those things is because they divide community. After he says all the things you shouldn't wear, he says, "because here in the church there is no Jew, nor Greek, slave, nor free." You should be unified and the things you shouldn't be wearing will bring disunity.

Last week we talked about what you should be wearing. Paul said, "As God's chosen ones put on humility and kindness and compassion and love which binds them all together." We put on these good things in order to not only live out the Gospel, but also to live with each other. It would be really easy to live out the Gospel were it not for each other. It's the old joke, ministry would be really easy if it wasn't for all of you. But that's the point, isn't it?

Paul is telling us how we should live before God in the way Jesus would have us live. But ultimately, how do we live with each other? That's where it matters, because if we can't live with each other we're really not living before God. As I'm thinking through these things, I'll envision myself in different scenarios. What if I was having a conversation with the Apostle Paul? When you're reading the Apostle Paul, if you're thoughtful you can anticipate where he's going. You stop in a place and think, "Well, if that's true, what about this?"

Last week I made the point that Paul's really telling us that there are some cases in which it is wrong to be right. You may be right but for the sake of unity, if it's a non-essential issue it's better that you be wrong. Forgive one another as the Lord has forgiven you. If you ask the question, "Well Paul, what's the best context in which to encourage each other toward unity and the best context to edify and build up one other within the church?" The last thing I would expect him to say (and if he said it to my face I would have no doubt laughed), is "Worship." "Paul, where's the place where people's getting along and unity in everything should be the most in-front of the world?" Paul says, "Worship." "Where should I encourage people toward unity?" "Worship."

Why would that make me laugh? After nearly twenty years in the ministry, most of the conflicts that I've seen in church have to do with worship. Out of all the letters – I haven't received a lot lately (people were worried this morning) - I've seen in the last fifteen years or so, the nasty and discouraging letters, probably 70 percent of them have to do with worship. I'm guessing in the history of this church if you asked the elders how many letters like that they've received there will probably be at least that much. People are very passionate about the issue of worship to the point where it divides. You hear of "worship wars." Yet, Paul says it should be the place where it's a no-brainer. "If you don't get along anywhere else it should be right here, and it should be around this one thing." So the question is, "Why don't we get it?" Why do we fight about it so much? My contention, at least from what Paul says here, is that we don't really understand the Gospel, which is just like every other problem we have. The natural outworking of what Paul taught us last week about what Jesus has done for us and His grace will be the way we worship.

We're going to look at three things this morning. The first thing is the engine of worship. The second thing is the practice of worship, and the third is the extent of worship.

Before I talk about those three things, though, I think it would be helpful to define some terms because different people think different things when you say "worship." For the sake of what I'm saying today, worship has two definitions, sort of a subjective definition and an objective definition, or a theoretical definition and a practical definition. The theoretical definition is something along the lines of "thankful awe," or "thankful reverence," or "thankful giving of praise." It's hard to capture. As I thought about it, it's captured in some wedding vows that I often use.

Whenever someone comes and says, "Tommy, will you marry us?" Assuming I say yes, I will sit down with them and say, "I have two wedding services. I have one that's very traditional Presbyterian. It's really good. And I have one over here that's really cool." The one that's really cool is really cool because it comes from the twelfth century; it's medieval. The language tends to make people's eyes pop when you read some of it. The coolest part about the whole thing is watching the congregation as I'm reading the words to the couple in the giving and receiving of rings. I say take the ring and husband will take the ring and say, "Sally (or whatever her name is), with this ring I thee wed. With my body I thee worship, and with all my worldly goods I thee endow." I love to see people's eyes pop. The theologians out there say, "Well, that's idolatry." It wasn't to them because they didn't mean the same thing. In that sense, worship means everything that I am I'm giving to you – not just with my mouth, not just in the vows, but when we leave from this ceremony, everything that I am including my body is yours. It's completely and utterly committed to you and to making you look good, making us look good together, and to being completely bound to you forever. That's worship. When you think about worship of God it's the same thing.

If that doesn't do it for you, I was thinking this week that it's sort of the attitude my dog Ransom has when I have cheese. The girls and Judy were out of town and they left Ransom with me. We could never get him to come when called. I thought, "I'll fix his wagon." So I got a whole bunch of cheese and I went outside and threw the tennis ball. He just sat out there [gesturing as if smoking a cigarette]. I'd hold up a piece of cheese, "Ransom?" He's like Toto from the Wizard of Oz. His little ears would go up and he couldn't get back fast enough. After a couple of times he lived for me. I'd walk around with cheese in my hand and he could not take his eyes off of me. He was enamored. That's worship. That's a subjective. It's hard to get your hands around exactly what it means because it means so many things. But just try and get a grasp on that sort of subjective sense of reverence and awe.

On the other side, practically speaking, what is worship? The best definition that I know of is, in the context of the church, it simply means the rehearsing of God's saving deeds in history. In whatever form you choose to do that, whatever your cultural background, you're rehearsing what God has done in history for the church and for you. Practically speaking it's a rehearsal service every week. Why is there any problem with that? The problem is that in the church there are two camps. There's the contemporary camp and there's what I'm going to call the traditional camp or the historic camp.

What's the problem with the contemporary camp? I know after this people are not going to agree with what I say, but that's fine. Write a letter. Don't sign it. (Because I don't read unsigned letters - if you don't get that joke). Contemporary worship on one hand says, "We need to stop spending so much time thinking about history and tradition. We need to jettison that. What we need to do, is elevate pop culture so that people can understand. So history is denigrated and pop culture is elevated. That's one issue that they have. But also they tend to emphasize the imminence of God or the very presence of God. Everything is "me and God." So it's very right-here. "God is my friend." That's not necessarily wrong unless that's the only thing you do.

At the other end of the continuum you have what's called traditional worship, and everyone's somewhere in between. Traditional worship on one hand elevates history. It tends to denigrate popular culture. Instead of emphasizing the presence of God and the immediacy of God, it tends to emphasize the transcendence of God. If that's all you do, you're missing something.

I'm going to tell you, surprise, surprise. Guess what? They need each other. If you're going to elevate culture, the question you have to ask is, "What culture gets elevated?" Should it be Anglo culture? Should it be White culture? Should it be Black culture? Should it be Latin-American culture? If you're going to elevate one culture and say, "This is the way it should always be done," which one is it going to be? I'm going to tell you which one it always is in a minute. The next issue is when you think about the traditional side and you want to elevate history and tradition, the question is, "whose history and whose tradition are you going to elevate?" At what point are you going to stop? Is it going to be fifteenth century, sixteenth century, seventeenth century, eighteenth century? What are you going to do? No one really knows, do they? Everyone knows in their own heart, which is why it's one of the reasons that it's wrong to be right-here oftentimes. But the other issue is that, in my opinion, in my ministry, almost every discussion I've ever heard of worship – almost every one – at the end of the day it always comes down to the issue of personal preference – "What I like and what I care about, and what I think is important." You can come and make a case that this is the most Godly or that's the most Biblical, but at the end of the day it's really your preference. As long as you're willing to admit that, we can talk. What does Paul say about worship here? On one hand he says some very specific things. On the other hand he makes things very general. The thing is the Bible gives us several mandates that are supposed to happen in worship, but it never gives us an Order of Service. More than anyone else I wish there was a Psalm 151 that was just an Order of Service – just do this every time and you'll be good. But the Bible doesn't do that. So we have to figure it out ourselves at some level. The first thing we need to figure out is what is the engine of worship. What drives it? What should drive all worship? In the first part of verse 16 Paul says:

¹⁶ Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly . . . (ESV)

That's it. He's talking to the community. That's the plural of you. He's not saying let the word of Christ dwell in you personally richly (although I'm sure he would say that). He's talking about the community. What does he mean when he says, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly"? Most Evangelicals, if you said, "What does he mean by the Word of Christ?" Would answer, "Well, probably the Bible – the word of God." Right? The answer from Paul is "No." I'm not saying that it shouldn't. But if you think about it, Paul didn't have the Bible back then. He had the Old Testament, but he didn't have the New Testament, which is what we would typically talk about as the Word of Christ. It must mean something else. Probably a better translation would be something like this, "Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly." Or, "Let the message of the Gospel of Christ dwell among you richly." Surprise, surprise, the Gospel itself is the engine of worship. The Gospel not only should drive our worship, but the Gospel informs our worship.

How does the Gospel drive our worship as the engine? Because when you begin to think about it, what is worship? Back to the definition. Worship is a rehearsal of God's saving deeds in history. What has God done in our history as a church? I don't mean recent history, I mean all the way back to the beginning. He delivered Israel from Egypt promising He would eventually send a redeemer. Then He eventually sent Jesus and now you personally trust Jesus. Is that a reason to worship? Is that not like cheese to Ransom? Is that not something that you would constantly be enamored with? "Look at what this man Jesus has done for me." What is the Gospel? The Gospel is just this, that Jesus lived the life that you and I should have lived and He died the death that we should have died, and because of that we now can have a relationship with God. Are you a Christian here? If you are, I have one simple question. Do you really believe that? If you're not a Christian, let me ask you. Have you ever thought about that? Do you believe that or would you be willing to consider that. Once you're willing to consider that it affects every other area of life, particularly worship.

So what's the issue with worship? The engine of worship is this message of Jesus or the Gospel of Jesus. That makes every single worship service that you have ever gone to by definition, whether it's successful or unsuccessful, evangelistic in nature. One of the big issues and struggles in the church, is whether worship services should be evangelistic. Should they be seeker-centered? Should they try and just pander to people who don't trust Jesus or should they be just for edification? In other words, "It's just us here. Let's just talk about what we know is true." If you look at the Bible, it's always both. If you look through the Old Testament, what is God constantly telling Israel to do in the psalms? I read you one at the Call to Worship. "Praise my name among the nations." He's constantly telling the nation of Israel to praise His name in front of all the unbelieving nations. We're going to look in the fall at David and Goliath. Remember David slays Goliath? He tells them why God did that. You can imagine, on one hand, you have the Philistines. On the other hand, you have Israel. He said in

this one event, "The reason that God did this was so that you, Philistines, would know that there is a God in Israel, and so that you, Israel, would know that God does not deliver by sword or by chariot." Every worship service is evangelistic by definition because if you're a Christian you need to be evangelized just as much as the person who does not know Jesus. Unless you've somehow become completely and utterly like Jesus, and you need to be reminded of His finished work for you, of what He's done and how He's done it, and what He means to you. That is evangelism.

Before I became a pastor of an established church and when I was a church planter, I was an evangelist. I evangelized people who didn't know Jesus and people who did know Jesus because the only thing that we have is Jesus. The job, in my opinion, of the pastor is constantly bringing you back to that. That's the engine. The engine of worship is the Gospel and, by definition, worship is always evangelistic. People are always worried about that when you say that because they're afraid that you're going to try and just make people comfortable. The Apostle Paul tells us in I Corinthians 14 that the goal of the church is not to make people who are not believers comfortable. So if you're not a believer I hope you're feeling very uncomfortable right now. Not really.

The goal of the church ought to be not necessarily to make worship uncomfortable, but to make worship intelligible. When Paul was writing about speaking in tongues in I Corinthians 14, people were wondering what to do. I'm summarizing here, obviously. But Paul says that whatever happens, when the Barbarian walks into the back of the Narthex, he needs to understand what's going on. He's certainly not comfortable, because remember Paul says that if he understands what's going on, then he's going to be convicted of his sin and fall on his face and worship. So comfort isn't the issue. The question is, "Do you understand what's going on?" I hope that helps you understand why it is I explain things so often. I hear every now and then, "Every week you say, God always initiates with sinners. You say the same thing every week. We got it. I say it in my sleep." My first response to that is, "Good. If you're saying it in your sleep, you've finally gotten to the point where I am. That's where you need to be." The second thing is, there's a lot of other people for whom it's their first time here. As a church, our responsibility is to make sure they know what's going on. I'm a pastor and I get frustrated when I go to a church and I don't have a clue what's going on – when I should stand, when I should sit, why we're doing this. It drives me crazy. How much more so for someone who's nervous and checking things out? Should they not be able to understand what's going on? It might be uncomfortable, but at least it will be intelligible. So that's the engine. It's the Gospel.

What about the practice of worship? Paul gives us some broad categories here. There are as many different opinions as there are biblical scholars. What you're going to get today is what I think is right. Let's look next at the practice of worship. Paul says,

¹⁶ *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, (how should that happen, Paul?) teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. (ESV)*

The Gospel should be the engine of worship. He says first by teaching and admonishing one another. Teaching is positive and instruction. Admonishment is negative. He says here, "teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom." Don't go off half-cocked - "in all wisdom." It might be better to say, "teaching and admonishing one another with all wisdom - not just comma - singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs," but having the word by in there, "teaching and admonishing by singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs." One of the primary places that we're to encourage each other and admonish each other and teach one another is in the context of worship. If you think about it, when you sing a hymn, you're praising God, but at the same time the people around you are hearing you, are they not? They should be. Worship is directed toward God, but it also has a wide berth that it carries, and it should also affect those around us. If you're not a Christian you might sing something and for the first time you get it. If you are a Christian, you sing something for the millionth time and it makes you cry every time.

He gives us basically three things that should be happening in worship: Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Some commentators say that all three of those things are just synonyms for one another, and Paul's using it for emphasis. I don't believe that because I don't think Paul would waste his time like that. Also the early church

read that verse very differently than just saying, "It's generic." The best I can do for you is tell you what the early church thought about these things when they say "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs."

Here's what worship should look like, or at least here's what it should include in its practice. First is psalms. Have you ever heard anyone say that? Every week. Why should the psalms be included in worship? Because psalms first and foremost are the baseline. They're the hymnbook of Israel. They're the hymnbook of the church, and they are the baseline to teach us what it means to worship. When you look at the psalms you see both the eminence of God, or the fact that God is right here with you, and you see the transcendence of God. The psalms don't pick one over the other. Also, the psalms teach how to praise God. They teach us how to adore him and how to confess our sins. So the psalms are the baseline for worship. By the way, the Greek word there for psalms indicates that they are psalms to be played on strings – psalmo.

The next thing in the list is hymns. What does he mean by hymns? Again, people may disagree, but probably something like – hymns. The psalms are the baseline for worship but there's also a place for people in the church to capture and record the church's theological history and the church's theological tradition. You know what is the most important theological book you find in any church? It's right here [holding up a hymnal]. If you come up to me and say, "If I could get just one book to learn all of my theology, what should I get?" "The Trinity Hymnal." In fact it's so important, when I first became the senior pastor one of the first orders of business that was enabled by some very gracious folks was to change the hymnals from what we had. In the EPC, as senior pastor you're not only responsible for what goes on in worship, but also for the spiritual nature of your congregation, and for me to do that I needed to be able to trust the theology of the hymnal. If you want to learn theology, sing your hymns. A lot of you know a lot more theology than you think you do because you know a lot of hymns. If you say, "I only want contemporary music and I only want praise music" what you in fact are saying is, "What God has done in the last two thousand years is worthless." One of the primary ways we need to integrate our kids into the church and to teach our kids good theology is to make sure they know the hymns of the church. Do your kids know hymns? By the way, I'm not a hymn-only guy even though I am old school. But that portion is just as important. Do you know the theology of your church? In fact, you see a lot of the hymns in the New Testament where you see them sort of set aside as little creeds. This morning, instead of the Doxology, I asked the musicians if we could do the Gloria Patri because the Gloria Patri was a response to heresy in the ancient church. Look in the hymnal. It says second century A.D. That's when they were arguing whether Jesus was God. Apparently the heretics came up with some jingles. You know, "Ho Ho Ho, Green Giant." It's a good jingle. So how do you combat a good jingle? You come up with a better one. "Glory be to the Father. Who was in the beginning, who is, and will be forever." I think that little jingle was better because it's still here. I don't know the Armenian ones. They're not around. So hymns are important. You can't just throw them out.

The next thing that Paul says, at least the way the early church read this, is the thing that is probably going to make the most people in this room very uncomfortable. He says, "Psalms, hymns, spiritual songs." Spiritual songs - there are, "ode pneumatice" or "pneumatic odes." It sounds like something that you should have in a Boeing machine shop, I'm thinking. Why would it make us uncomfortable here, at least as Presbyterians? It's because it includes unscripted things like "Hallelujahs." It's the things like "Praise God." It's the "Amen" that happen in church. I'm trying to move you that way. Why do you always say "Amen and . . . Amen" - that's what we're working on. It's a more spontaneous response to what's going on in worship. Paul said, "Is there room for that in your view of worship?"

Last week I did the Invocation at New Beginnings Christian Fellowship two blocks north of us. Great service. If you're not familiar with the church, it's primarily an African-American church. I got up to do the Invocation. They gave me three minutes; it took me five, but that's because I got more "Amen" there than I've gotten in five years here. That's one way to worship, and it's not always right. They have issues as well. But the fact is, the more someone is responding, the more you want to keep going, don't you? I could have probably kept going all day. But it helped me understand why their worship services run long. We ought to be out of here by 12:15 or else we're in trouble. We have to beat the Baptists to lunch. It shouldn't be that way. Are we open to what the Holy Spirit might do? I'm not advocating this particular thing, but we complain, "I can't believe they did this kind of worship versus that kind of worship." The whole time are you asking yourself, "What if the Holy Spirit showed up, would I be willing to see that happen?" Annie Dillard [*Teaching a Stone to Talk*] talks about walking into a church and being handed an Order of Worship, and she said, "If we really believed what the Gospel said

about Jesus and about God, they'd hand out crash helmets not Orders of Worship." Do you believe that when you walk into church?

I think at the end of the day what Paul is saying here is that worship at some level needs to be blended. We tend to think in church when we talk "blended" is a 50/50 compromise between this camp and that camp. All you contemporary worship people, every other Sunday we'll do your kind of music and all of you historic worshipers we'll do it your way the other time. That's not the point. If you're not challenged at some level in worship, if you're only contemporary, you need to hear the history. If you're only historical you need to hear the contemporary. You need to hear how to reach the people around you because once you start to do that, then you realize that worship expands from this place to everywhere else. That's what I'm going to finish with. The last thing is the extent of worship. Notice what Paul says,

¹⁷ And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him. (ESV)

To be honest with you, for most Christians, myself included, almost the only thing we do in the name of the Lord Jesus consciously is pray. If you don't pray in the name of the Lord Jesus, someone will tell you about it. Paul says, "In whatever you do, in word or in deed, do it in the name of the Lord Jesus, to the praise of God the Father." The extent of worship is that it is not just what happens in this place but it is all of life. Has anyone ever told you that? Remember when God placed Adam in the garden before the fall. The Hebrew says, "You're put here to work it and to keep it." Another way to translate that in the Hebrew is, "to worship and obey." Adam's primary worship was also his primary vocation – that Adam's job and his worship were one in the same. In the Gospel of Jesus, once He begins to redeem people, the same happens for you. What do you do? Are you a doctor? Are you a lawyer? Are you a builder? Are you a machinist? Are you a mom? What do you do? Whatever you do not only matters to God, but it is your primary outworking of worship. Do you believe that? When you go to work in the morning, do you go to work saying, "I can't wait to get there because this is what God has given me and the venue He's given me to worship today by word and by deed"? Imagine how different the world would look if just Christians treated their jobs as if they were worship. Do you think it would look different? I think it would, but you can't treat your job as if it were worship unless you first understand the engine of worship. Do you really understand the Gospel? Whenever your job begins to feel like drudgery and toil either one of two things needs to happen. Maybe you might need to find a different job, but the other thing you may just need to remind yourself of is the Gospel.

Judy reminded me the other day that she thinks that she has to remind me of the Gospel a lot more than I need to remind her because I'm a pastor. Sitting in my office I have to tell myself the same thing. Is what I'm doing actually worship as well or is just cranking out another widget or another sermon? If it is worship in and of itself then it changes everything. Also, worship by definition is what? It's evangelistic. Do you want to know how to reach your friends and your neighbors? Right there it says it. "Whatever you do, do in the name of the Lord Jesus with praise to God." You don't need a class in order to know how to do evangelism. What you need to know is that your work is worship, that your play is worship. That by definition is evangelistic.

I'll finish with this story about when I was in college. I worked for the Olive Garden in Tallahassee. In Tallahassee, Florida, the Olive Garden is where people take their prom dates. There are not a lot of fancy places in Tallahassee. I couldn't help but constantly sing as I was working – even here I sing. I'm partly deaf, so I don't know if I can sing well or not, but who cares. I remember walking up and down the alley at the Olive Garden. Salad flying, everything going crazy. I'm just singing, "Lo, he comes on clouds descending. Once for favored sinners slain. Thousand, thousand saints attending join the triumph of His name. Oh come quickly, oh come quickly . . ." I don't know why that song in particular was stuck in my head and why I sang it so loudly, but at one point one of my co-workers came up and said, "Tommy, I have two questions. Why are you singing, and can you explain to me what it is you were singing?" Her name was Julie. I remember sitting down with her at break, and Julie became a Christian. Several months later, they actually threw me a party to leave to go to seminary. I think they were ready to get rid of me. She ran out in the parking lot and flagged me down and said, "Tommy, thanks for singing." If your work is worship, it cannot help but affect those around you. Think about that.