

CORPORATE WORSHIP

Series: Created to Worship

Colossians 3:12-17

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It's no secret that music is powerful. Research shows that music can bring healing to our lives. Some people, casually or professionally, use music to help them through life. Music therapists say music can help people sleep, process emotions, lower blood pressure, strengthen the immune system, manage pain better, improve relationships, self-regulate, and enhance learning and memory retention. That's an impressive claim! As for the enhanced learning and memory retention part, this is why you can't remember what I taught last month, but you can remember that song your mom taught you when you were five years old. But think about this too: there is a link between the music you listen to and the choices you make. They say music is the window to the soul. It reaches to the deepest parts of who you are and affects your thinking patterns and worldview—what you think about yourself, others, and the world. Therefore, it affects the decisions you make.

In the San Quentin prison, there are or used to be some inmates who called themselves *Through the Walls*. They wanted to influence people “through the walls” of the prison with positive music. They do this because they believe negative music with immoral lyrics is what helped put them behind those walls. They were influenced by the music they listened to. They will tell people not to listen to their old music because they realize now that their message and intent was not life-giving, and they realize the damage it could do to those who listen to it. Then there's the story of a schoolteacher who started playing Mozart as her kids came into class each day. At first, the kids said they hated it but she ignored them. In time, she said their academic scores went up and their misbehavior went down. This study was also demonstrated in a university setting. So music is powerful. It's life-shaping. And we're going to talk a lot about music and preaching—two things we listen to—as we revisit this year's theme for the last time.

Every now and then throughout the year we have revisited the idea of worship. First, we defined it. It's living in response to God at all times or how we live our lives in an engaging response to God. It encompasses the totality of one's life and decisions. Therefore worship brings meaning and purpose to even the most mundane moments in life. We also looked at how the Bible says we become like what we worship—that was an interesting message on idolatry. We looked at some of the different ways we worship on a personal level—how we might all have slightly different worship temperaments. Then we discussed generosity as worship and work as worship. The one that we are going to talk about today is the one that most people probably would've expected me to start with: the formal, **corporate worship** service in the local church.

As I've mentioned, this is usually the first thing we think of when we think of worship. We think of it as something we do for an hour on Sunday or even more narrowly, only the singing portion of the service. That's a very unspiritual minded trap that we fall into. Worship is so much more than that. However, it doesn't mean we should think lightly of, or less of, corporate gatherings for

worship that are dominated by preaching and singing. **Formal, public religious services and activities in a local church are an integral part of a Christian's worship** (Heb. 10:25). I would be so bold as to say that a Christian's worship and sanctification will be incomplete without it. It's that essential. There's a lot of ministries out there that are doing a lot of good outside the local church, but we should never forget that the local church is the number one strategy of God in the world today to reach the world. God loves the local church. Paul was a church planting freak. And I realized when I was in South America that not being faithfully tied to a local church and visiting a different church every week made me crazy. I became a local church freak. I realized how important it was and that even if you're in a parachurch ministry of some kind, you should be involved in a local church and attending corporate worship gathering. So we're going to focus on corporate worship from **Colossians 3:12-17**, but our emphasis is mostly going to be on **Colossians 3:16**. This is one of those verses that every Christian and local church should know well.

12 So, as those who have been chosen of God, holy and beloved, put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience; 13 bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so must you do also. 14 In addition to all these things put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. 15 Let the peace of Christ, to which you were indeed called in one body, rule in your hearts; and be thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God. 17 Whatever you do in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.

In the context of this book, Paul has established *who Christ is*—all supreme and all sufficient Lord. He has also established *who we are in Christ*. Having been united with Him through faith in the working of the Spirit, we now have new life in Christ. *Positionally*, we are seated with Christ at the right hand of God. We have died and our life is hidden with Christ in God (3:1-4). Because of that *position* in Christ—as God's chosen, set apart and beloved people—the *condition* of our lives should change. So in a clothing motif, Paul talks about putting off the old man and putting on the new man (3:5-11). He says to put off the sinful ways and put on Christlike virtues that are expected of a believer, and we can because we are in Christ (1:27). That doesn't mean we won't wrestle with sin or bad habits, but that we have Christ. He is the resource we need. Back in the day they used to post "Wanted" signs: "Dead or Alive." I guess you could say God wants us dead and alive. Dead to sin and alive to God in righteousness. He doesn't want us sort of dead and sort of alive; sort of worshipping and sort of not. He wants us to live a life of worship.

But while it's easy to pick up on the *individual* commands in this passage, you may have also noted the *corporate* commands. These virtues involve people in the plural. These are social virtues. Being kind and forbearing, forgiving and loving. Called into "one body." There's talk of "one another"-ing in the context. So this is instruction for a local church body and how to get along and how to hold a proper worship service. And as you see in verse 16 and as you see in our church today, services are dominated by the teaching God's Word and by singing. First, we focus on the Word of God.

I. CORPORATE WORSHIP UNDER THE WORD. (V. 16)

Paul says, “*Let the message [or word] of Christ dwell within you richly.*” Some translate that as “among you” instead of “within you” because it is another acceptable translation. However you interpret it doesn’t really change the intention because in order for the word of Christ to *dwell among us* as a church it has to *dwell within us* individually. In Colossae, to the original audience, the word of Christ is contrasted with the word of the false teachers who were diluting Christ’s deity and the gospel of grace by introducing their man-made traditions, religious rules, and human philosophies that they called wisdom. Paul is saying don’t let the manmade, mystical, religious junk dwell among you. Don’t let it in your congregation to stay. Let the Word of God and the gospel dwell among you. Kick the false gospel and false wisdom out and make room for God’s Word. Paul says in Colossians 2:3 that **all treasures of wisdom and knowledge are hidden in Christ Himself**. You don’t need anything but Christ. In Him **all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form and in Him you have been made complete**. Problems arise when we forget that and lose our focus on Christ and God’s Word.

That word “**dwell**” is significant here. It carries the idea of permanent residence. Your home is your dwelling. Your family dwells with you. They live with you, day in and day out. And that’s how the Word of God should be in your life and mine. It should have a permanent place in our daily lives. It shouldn’t be like a temporary house guest who comes and goes, or someone who only comes over for a snack and then leaves. Many Christians treat the Word of God like that. They get a Bible verse here and there from Facebook or Instagram or a preacher, but they never let the Word *dwell* with them **richly/abundantly** like a family member or spouse. That’s why my challenge to the church right now is to set a goal to read the entire Bible next year. Read the whole Bible. Sure, it’s not the easiest thing in the world but anything worth doing requires some discipline and effort. Get into the habit of reading it daily. Personally, I couldn’t imagine standing before God someday and Him saying, “How’d you like My Word?” and having to say, “Well, I never took the time to read it. I as too busy for it; too busy spending hours with tv, Facebook and podcasts every day.” Folks, God gave His Word because He wants us to know Him. He gave us something better than a temporary audible source. He gave His Word in written form so that it permanently dwelling with us. People who prioritize the Word and let it dwell richly in their lives by reading it, studying it, and meditating upon it, are the people who grow and whose lives are changed. The Word will transform our lives if we let it dwell within us richly. Studies show that in contrast, those who do not let the Word of God dwell richly in them experience little to no change at all.

But the same could be said for some churches. There should be in the public gathering of Christians, a proclamation and impartation of the Word of God and the gospel. People need to be fed and built up through **teaching** and **admonishment**. Teaching, positive instruction; and admonishment, negative correction. That’s why He gives men spiritual gifts for preaching and teaching: to build up the body of Christ (Eph. 4:11-12). And don’t forget this: sitting under the teaching and or preaching of the Word of God is part of how we worship. We are surrendering our heart and mind, our body, time, and attention to God with the desire to hear from Him, get to know Him, and become more like Him.

However, there is a danger today in churches to minimize God's Word. Paul wrote to Timothy in **2 Timothy 3:16-17** adjuring him by the heavenly court to preach the inspired Word of God in season and out of season because the day would come when men won't want to listen to it and will turn away from the truth. When we look around, we can't help but see that in our day. There is a lack of simple Bible teaching in many churches today. Far more attention is given to entertainment, fluffy, self-help messages, and manmade traditions than to the truth of God's Word. In many churches, where the Word of God is opened, they often skip over the difficult stuff. That's why we spend most of our time in this church preaching through books of the Bible. My aim is to preach and teach the whole counsel of God slowly and steadily and in a way that is accessible to every age (so that everyone can get something out of it) but also forces us to grow. And here's why this is so important: Because if we are going to worship God acceptably, corporately or individually, we must be rooted in Scripture. We want every aspect of our lives and church to be informed by and governed by the authority of God's Word. That's how God is glorified and worshipped. God is not glorified by a church that fails to heed His Word and is practicing all sorts of things that are unbiblical. That church may be acceptable to the world, but not to God. We want the Word to permeate and saturate our lives and our church. Paul says **let** the Word dwell among you richly. The word "let" in the Greek is a command. So the question becomes, *Are we letting God's Word dwell in our lives or our church?*

II. CORPORATE WORSHIP IN SONG. (V. 16)

Here we want to focus on that other part of verse 16, "*teaching and admonishing one another through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, singing to God with gratitude in your hearts.*" Should we be surprised that worship in song follows an emphasis on the Word? I don't think so and here's why. Wherever there is spiritual revival or a Christian awakening of some kind, or even just a healthy church, you will find joyful and grateful singing. It's natural for those who understand God's Word and what Christ has done for them to express their gratefulness in song. When the buckets of our lives are full to the brim with God's Word and the gospel realities, we have Christ's peace ruling in our hearts, and we spill forth in song. I would say singing is the result of the study of the Word of God. The Word-filled Christian is going to be a Spirit-filled, and thus, song-filled Christian. So it's natural. Another reason is because music and singing are part of the **teaching** ministry of the church. Paul says, "*teaching and admonishing one another through [or with]... songs.*"

Singing is instructive.

We should be committed to the public reading *and singing* of Scripture. Scripture was not only made to be read but to be sung. In fact, some of the Scripture is song. Psalms is the songbook of the Bible and there are many songs throughout the Bible. A lot of Scripture has been put to song. We learn so much Scripture and truth through songs. We memorize Scripture and doctrines through song. Singing is part of how we see to it that truth dwells in us. Music makes the truth stick. It also counsels us and ministers to us in ways preaching can't sometimes. Can you imagine a church without singing? That's why the music team is so important and if the Lord leads, I'd encourage you to get involved in it.

Not long ago, someone (not someone here and who didn't claim to be a Christian) made the comment, "Why do we have sing in church? Why can't we just get on with the teaching?" One reason is that singing is part of the teaching. But that being said, we should carefully think about the songs that we do sing. If songs are not just for entertainment or to make us feel a certain way, but for teaching and discipling, we should make sure that what they are teaching is true and in line with the Word. More important than the emotional impact of the songs is the teaching in them. Songs should be saturated with the truth of Scripture.

I don't remember who said it or wrote it, but someone said we are wired to receive food and water, but you have to be careful about what food and water you receive. You wouldn't receive moldy food or contaminated water. In the same way, we are wired to receive music and respond to it, but we have to be careful about what music we receive. Those inmates that I mentioned in the beginning learned that the hard way. Warren Wiersbe said this, "Perhaps this "poverty of Scripture" in our churches is one cause of the abundance of unbiblical songs that we have today. A singer has no more right to sing a lie than a preacher has to preach a lie. The great songs of the faith were, for the most part, written by believers who knew the doctrines of the Word of God. Many so-called "Christian songs" today are written by people with little or no knowledge of the Word of God. It is a dangerous thing to separate the praise of God from the Word of God."¹ That's a great reminder for us when it comes to singing and preaching and how they influence each other. Just because a song is popular or sounds good or has a catchy beat doesn't mean it's true or is fit for use in church. That's what I appreciate about one of the radio ministries some of our missionaries in Utah work with called *Key Radio*. They are trying to reach Mormons with the real gospel and I've heard them in the presentation of their ministry say that the first thing they do is make sure a song is biblically accurate. Does it even qualify to be played on their radio station? It doesn't matter if it's a top 10 hit and everyone else is playing it, they won't play it if has unbiblical teachings in it.

In verse 16, the Apostle Paul mentions **3 types of songs**:

1. Psalms (*psalmois*):

These are from the Old Testament book of Psalms, or the Psalter—the song book of the Bible. Today many songs are still based on the psalms.

2. Hymns (*hymnois*):

Hymns might refer to songs that might not be in the Psalms but are still praise songs based on truth (Acts 16:25). Actually, you see some early Christians hymns in the New Testament. Paul quoted a few in his writings (Eph. 5:14; Phil. 2:6-11; 1 Tim. 3:16). Actually archaeologists have discovered that the church turned **Colossians 1:15-20**—probably the meatiest part of this book—into a hymn.

3. Spiritual Songs (*odais pneumatikais*):

Spiritual songs are frequently understood as a reference to songs that speak of the believer's enjoyment of life under God.² Maybe they are a lot like many of today's songs that include personal testimony. Many songs are about what God is doing or has done for someone.

I think it's healthy to have all kinds of songs in the mix. I enjoy them all, and God gives us the freedom too. Let's sing the psalms and those old, meaty hymns! Let's sing a new spiritual song to

the Lord! Many times, the Bible says to sing “*a new song*.” Some churches want to focus on all spiritual songs or only sing hymns these days. I know of a church who had different music at different services. You go to the 8 am service to sing out of the hymn books. You go to the 11 am service to sing the newer spiritual songs. Well, as you can imagine, the first service was the older generation, and the second service was the younger generation. It divided the church generationally and to no surprise, the church eventually split. I’ve sometimes wondered if applying this one verse (Col. 3:16) should’ve brought healing to that congregation in this area.

Somewhat early on in my Christian experience, I came across a preacher who said that you couldn’t use drums in church. After I heard that I took out my newly acquired concordance and looked up every verse relating to music in the Bible. I looked up the words “music, song, singing, instrument, choir.” I looked up all those verses and realized there wasn’t really any argument for that. There are percussion instruments in the OT—even “loud cymbals” David had made for worship. Then there’s a whole branch of Christianity that says you can’t or shouldn’t use musical instruments in worship because you are supposed to “*make melody in your heart to the Lord*” (Eph. 5:19). The melody is to be “in your heart” and not with instruments, they say. But that’s not at all what Paul is saying. The point is, like in Colossians, that we should sing with our hearts engaged. Put your heart into it! Let what is coming out of your lips not just be empty words. Let there be heart-felt praise and affection to back it up—mean it! This leads us to the next point:

Singing is transformative.

We’re not going to spend much time on this because I think we’ve made the point already. Music is influential on us individually, we know, but it can also influence the congregation as well. I would say that worship in song together fosters those virtues Paul mentioned in the passage. It brings the congregation into a unity of spirit; unity of mutual edification; unity of mind. It can transform and unify a congregation. How hard to have an argument with another believer after you’ve just sang a song of praise? We don’t often consider it, but the music affects our spiritual state like that. It can have a real affect on our physical and spiritual state. In fact, I would bet that some of y’all’s blood pressure went down from before the service to immediately after the first set of songs. Music really does that. But I would also bet that you were a different person last night or getting ready for church than you were after singing this morning. I bet you had more peace and joy and contentment after that fourth song than when you were getting ready for church or than you were in attitude last night. The right music has a fine way of taking grumblers and making them grateful; taking worriers and making them worshippers. One man said, “While worship offers praise to God, who is certainly worthy to receive it, participation in these worshipful activities creates a giving, thankful, humble, and peaceful spirit within the believer. These practices act as a means of spiritual formation.”³ But there’s one more point we don’t want to miss from v. 16:

Singing is ministry to the Lord.

Paul says we are singing with thankfulness in our heart **to God**. In Ephesians 5:19-20, a parallel passage, he says to sing “**to the Lord**.” Singing is ministering *to the Lord*. God wants to hear our

voices. It doesn't matter if you sound like a crow or a canary, He wants to hear us praise Him. He created us to do that forever. We were made to sing praises to Him. **Hebrews 13:15** says "*Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name.*" We can think of singing as a spiritual, sacrificial offering to God, and one that is characterized by **thankfulness** because He is our Creator and Savior. We owe everything to Him and when we focus on how good He is as Creator and Savior, it makes us less greedy and discontent, and more thankful, generous, peaceable, and content.

We were created to worship!

To wrap up this study, let's simply remind ourselves that worship is what we were created for! Verse 17 is the perfect verse to close out this series. It says that **in everything we do**—eating, drinking, teaching, exercising, working, playing, cleaning, whatever—**we are to do it in the name of the Lord Jesus**. As J. Vernon McGee said, that's our yardstick right there for measuring every situation in life. We don't have in God's Word an answer on how to respond to every single situation in life. But we have this great over-arching principle that says, Can I do this in the name of the Lord Jesus or not? Will it honor His name or not? If not, it's not worship. If yes, then we're worshipping, even in the mundane choices and situations in life.

¹ Warren Wiersbe, *The Wiersbe Bible Commentary: New Testament* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2007), 688.

² Allen P. Ross, *Recalling the Hope of Glory* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2006), 440.

³ A. Chadwick Thornhill, *Biblical Worship* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2021), 439.