

The Steps that Lead to Worship

Colossians 3:1-17

Rev. Brett Shoemaker ~ January 20, 2019 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

So if you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. 2 Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth, 3 for you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. 4 When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.

5 Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly: fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry). 6 On account of these the wrath of God is coming on those who are disobedient. 7 These are the ways you also once followed, when you were living that life. 8 But now you must get rid of all such things—anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth. 9 Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have stripped off the old self with its practices 10 and have clothed yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. 11 In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!

12 As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. 13 Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. 14 Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. 15 And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be

thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs 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.

✕ ✕ ✕ ✕ ✕ ✕ ✕

During the month of January, we are taking a break from the Book of Luke. We are beginning this year by thinking carefully together about who we can be has a church on Sunday mornings.

Two weeks ago, we talked about the importance of prioritizing our Sunday mornings together as a community, to be present here together.

Last week, we talked about how we fulfill our vows together to take care of our children and youth in practical ways. I was amazed at the response—the eagerness of people of all ages to have conversations about how to be more involved in building relationships with young people, and helping them to grow in their faith.

This morning, Paul has a packed letter to the Colossians about their attitudes as God's people—attitudes that they carry as God's people into their worship. What can we set aside and what can we take on that may help us to worship more effectively together?

There is a television program called *House Hunters*. It's a reality show in which prospective

buyers are looking for the perfect home, and an agent guides them through several homes.

I wanted to show you a new idea for a reality show called Church Hunters. Here's a sneak peek at one of the episodes:

*** CHURCH HUNTERS (THREE SLIDES)

I can't speak for Jeff, but I'm afraid I'm at least a year or two away from untucking my shirt.

As a Christian culture, we have become really good at asking all kinds of questions about our preferences in the way we worship. Over the last 20 years, we have raised the value higher and higher of asking questions about how a church might best serve our needs.

In the few minutes between the front door of our house and the front door of our church, we naturally ask quite a few questions that essentially resemble this question: "What do I hope the worship service will do for me?"

ECCLESIASTES 5:1 says, "Guard your steps on the way to the house of God."

This verse is often used to make sure people are thinking holy thoughts or make sure they have all of their spiritual stuff together. Perhaps, that people would not fall into temptation and be steered *away* from the path towards God's house, or that they don't spend their tithing money on the way. But, listen to the rest of this verse:

"...to draw near to listen is better than the sacrifice offered by fools."

Even in the Old Testament, we hear a real theme (if we listen) that God puts a much lower value on our physical show of giving, and a much higher value on simply approaching God with humility and with an openness to listen to what God may have to say to us.

To guard our steps as we approach the house of God is to be careful to ask fewer questions about what do I want this worship service to be for me, and to ask instead this one question:

"What am I bringing with me to worship this morning?"

Now, lest I contradict my self, I am not talking merely about our physical offering or financial pledge. That is only a very small (but important) part of a much larger question: What do I bring to this worship service that will allow me to simply honor God and listen carefully to what God has to say to me?

RC Sproul says that, "It is the pleasing of God that is at the heart of worship." Certainly, I believe it pleases God when we are singing at the top of our lungs and listening with our whole hearts and worshipping with all we are because we *feel* something great that worship gives to us at that moment.

But I often wonder if it may please God even *more* when we put all of our selves into worship at that moment when we feel least inspired by what is going on around us--when we worship simply because God is worthy of honor and because we are obeying God because, well, God is God.

This isn't to say that we shouldn't care if worship has an element of inspiration or not, that we shouldn't care if it is not intentionally trying to reach the real honesty of who we are. But, in fact, if each one of us poured our hearts into worship, if we guarded our steps on the way to the house of God by preparing ourselves for worship, I really don't think those questions would need to be asked.

Colossians 3 begins with this line: "If you have been raised with Christ..." Paul is not talking to people that have been trying to figure out how to do church for decades and decades. He's talking to a church full of people who have very recently had A-HA moments in which the

gospel of grace, of Christ's death and Resurrection has brought them New Life. These people are hungry for any opportunity to raise their hands or hold out their hands or simply listen to what God has to say. This is a God that they are just getting to know and that has already amazed them. They have a fairly low bar on what worship needs to be. Because whenever they gather they are going to be throwing their entire hearts into this expression of gratitude to God.

And yet, Paul says to them, "Seek the things that are above, and set your minds on things that are above, and not on the things of Earth." There are still distractions even for these people. Just like you and I, they are human. Just like you and I, they need to be reminded that their life is not about them anymore, but their life is *hidden* with Christ in God. He says, "You have died, and it is Christ who is being revealed now in you." When we worship, it's not about us, it's about God.

Verses 5 through 11 could be a sermon of its own and probably should be. Paul knows there are things in the Colossian church that need to be looked at and put aside. And he brings out the laundry list. Fornication, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed. But the point here is not to break each one of these down and to analyze them (not yet). Each one of us could do that on our own. But look at what's in parentheses at the end of verse 5... (*which is idolatry*). All of these things are idols—something that tries to take the place of God.

As we approach the house of God on Sunday mornings, there is one main goal that Satan is trying to accomplish as we move from our warm beds to the front doors: He wants to turn our questions around. If we are setting our minds on things above and asking, "How can I make this worship service more about God?"—Satan is going to try to do everything in his power to get us to put our minds on things of this Earth and ask, "How can I make this worship service more about me?"

What can we do to prepare ourselves to meet this temptation head on? We can bring something to worship that is going to make it more about God and less about us?

I have a friend that had a Buick that must have been about 30 years old. He took great care of it and I never knew it to fail, but it was getting pretty worn out. Despite the age and value of his car, he still used one of those steering wheel lock bars (What do they call those? THE CLUB). I always just sort of shook my head that he would have to put that bar on, even if he was running into the store for 10 minutes. But there was something much more important that I remember about riding with this friend. Every time we got in the car, after he took off THE CLUB, I knew what was coming.. there would be about a 20 second pause while he silently bowed his head in Prayer. I knew that he was praying the same exact prayer every time—a prayer for protection and that he would glorify God on the road as he drove.

What a challenge that is to me and to all of us this morning. If my friend can take 20 seconds to prepare himself for something so routine that he does several times a day, how much more important for me to think carefully about the way I prepare myself to meet God in worship once a week?

Now, I do want to say, I have seen some of the intentional things that people bring to worship. They are things that serve as reminders that today, our hearts and our minds are going to be on God especially during this hour.

Some bring their own **Bibles**. What a great way to say that the Word of God holds real value, in a way that an app on our phone just can't really compete with. Some bring **notebooks**, to keep track of the ways God speaks, of the things we hear that may truly be God's voice to us, and to listen to themes that the spirit is speaking specifically into our individual lives.

There's some of you that offer to God the gift of a few **extra minutes** in the sanctuary before anything happens, and find that sometimes that's when the biggest things happen. If I walk into the sanctuary 20 minutes before the service, I know who is going to be here already, and I know in which pew you'll be sitting. I know which of you will *not* be here at that point, and that's okay. Possibly you're in your car bowing your head and asking for God to help you really pay attention...while you put THE CLUB on your steering wheel.

Paul offers another laundry list. It's a list of things that don't seem as tangible as a bible or notebook or even a few extra minutes. You might call them postures. Postures of readiness to worship in a community along with other people

Compassion. Compassion for that person who always seems to be standing or sitting alone.

Kindness. Kindness toward that person that posted something online yesterday that made you so angry.

Humility. Humility to hear something new in worship, and not just what you were hoping to hear.

Meekness. Meekness to refrain from speaking if it doesn't build someone up.

Patience. Patience to be okay if this week God didn't knock your socks off, knowing that God will get your attention at another time this week perhaps, so you keep open to that.

But most of all, above all of these, love. A love which is the reason for all of these others. A love we need to pray that God gives to us above all things.

After all of this preparation, Paul spends one verse on the actual act of worship, verse 16:

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly (because you have already allowed space for that to happen in prayer, or silence, or something you bring as a reminder);

teach and admonish one another in all wisdom (talk with each other, go to Sunday School);

and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God (make sure there is a variety of worship music so that you don't have to split your church up into traditional and contemporary services).

Hopefully you know which words are mine, and which are actually from Paul here.

And then, when all of this happens, worship becomes an extension of who you already are, in which all you do, in word and in deed, is in Jesus' name, and is out of thankfulness to God.

Worship, then, becomes an extension of lives *already* lived in worship, not something so different than Monday through Saturday.

This is Hugh Herr. He lost both of his legs to frostbite as a teenager, but with the use of prosthetics, he can now do again his favorite thing...climbing. He is also a biophysicist at MIT who is on the cutting edge of making these artificial limbs better. He says they are so effective, he often forgets they are even there. The technology is so good that when he thinks about moving his leg, it sends signals through his nerves to the ends that were severed. These artificial legs each have a bunch of computers the size of thumbnails that decode these messages and send make the legs move. Amazing.

However, he says they aren't done. His brain sends signals to his legs, but they legs cannot **yet** send signals back to the brain. He can't feel pain or pressure in a way that simulates real legs. They are half-way and Hugh says that the next step, the important step, is what is called, “bidirectionality,” where the limb ceases to be merely a tool, but it becomes part of the body, fully integrated into the nervous system, in which a person finally has full ownership over his new limbs.

For most of us, worship is still mono-directional (one way). We are still learning how to bring our whole selves and send responses back to God. A way in which worship becomes more than just a tool that we use when we need it once a week, but an extension of our whole spiritual selves. When that happens, we'll be more prepared to meet God regardless of the style of worship that may or may not suit us.

Perhaps as a reminder of the way we clothe ourselves for worship, someone may want to dress *down* a bit—more like they do on Wednesday to remember this is a continuation of our daily worship. Maybe someone else wants to dress *up* a little more to remember this time is an opportunity to bring special honor to their attention to God's voice.

Talk with each other. Be creative. I'd love to hear your ideas. Perhaps you want ideas of how you can come to serve in some way on a Sunday morning. That can be a great way to engage. On that back of your bulletin, you have an opportunity to check ways that you're interested in being a more integral part of the worship team. The two specific areas of need right now are people to lock up the church in the morning, and a communion coordinator, that would also serve on the worship committee as well. But these other ways may be options, too. Look carefully, check a box, then drop this in the offering plate, and we'll get back to you.

Now, whether you "do" something or not, there are so many creative ways that we can "guard our steps" toward God's house, to allow worship to be an extension and real motivation in our lives.

In any case, we come with *assurance* that God will do something special if we're open to it. Hebrews 4:16 says:

"Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may find mercy and grace in our time of need."

I want to end here with an important reminder. We've talked a lot about what we can do to prepare for worship. I hope that some ideas have begun to percolate for sure. But if we do nothing, God is still doing everything. It is still God that reaches out to us, that initiates while we are on the way to the House of God. We're just clearing a path...and for what?

God's mercy. God's grace.

God knows our greatest need better than we do. What if we parked a few blocks away, and walked toward the church simply repeating: "Thank you God for your grace. Help me see it today. Thank you God for your mercy. Help me see it today."

Amen.

✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘ ✘

The Next Step **A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application**

1. Read Colossians 3:1-7. As you read through this again, which verse seems most to be at the heart of the passage?
2. Which verses seem to have the most to say about the way we physically and spiritually approach our times of worship?
3. What do your "steps" usually look like when you "go to the house of God"? Describe your own process for preparing for worship? Are there steps you have found helpful in connecting with God before worship?
4. Which article of spiritual "clothing" in verses 12-15 would be a most helpful addition to your preparation for worship?
5. How does Hebrews 4:16 add something to the way we approach worship as? What does it look like to approach worship with "confidence" or

“boldness”?

6. What elements of our Sunday morning worship invite you into a two-way relationship with God?
7. If our offering is more than money, can you think of something tangible you can bring to contribute to the fullness of worship for your own benefit or for the benefit of others?
8. Verse 17 completes this process of worship. As you read it again, how might this final thought by Paul be an encouragement to live differently?

Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

What is one creative thing we can do as a family to prepare for worship on Sunday mornings?