

# Coming in First Place ~ the preeminence of Jesus Christ

"... so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything"(Colossians 1:18).

## Coming in First Place – The Book of Colossians

Colossians 3:12-17

*The Christian's Experience – A Putting On – The Word of Christ (3:16)*

***Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.***

How many of you think the life of a pastor is one to be envied? My first pastorate was in Bella Vista, nearly some 20 years ago. At the time, Bella Vista was predominately a retirement community, about 70% retired and 30% families. When the church there called me, the average age of the congregation was about 70, and that was after my daughter had just been born! I remember one of the first young couples to joined our church. They were such a blessing, having two young children of their own, they encouraged us greatly. One evening, having played tennis with them, I said that I needed to be going home to get some work done. Their daughter quickly piped up and asked, "Work, doesn't a Pastor only work on Sundays?" Each of us chuckled; knowing that there is a bit more to ministry than that. At least just a little more.

All a Pastor has to do is prepare a sermon, right? For all you students, how would you like to be writing at least one 10 page term paper weekly? All a pastor has to do is prepare lessons, which of course includes the reading of books along with outlining and presenting the materials. The pastor is just a coach. That's easy, the coach directing some talented players, balancing their own egos while teaching others who may not be as talented that they must be in the game. There is the pastor as a counselor. No pressure in that as he deals with issues ranging from strained relationships, to divorce; to deaths; to suicidal thoughts, and depression. There are funerals, weddings, births, graduations and a whole host of other life events. There are children's ministries, youth ministries, music ministries, nursing home ministries, elder meetings, deacons; the list could go on. This is all in the day and the life of a pastor. Is there pressure involved in leading and guiding a church? After a litany of personal trials, the apostle Paul said in 2 Corinthians 11:28, "*Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure on me of concern for all the churches.*"

What could cause pressure in ministry? Beloved, it is the people; *people by definition are pressure*. We all have our expectations, our desires, and our preferences. Some of them may be good and biblical; others not so much. Someone has said that ministry would be a lot easier if not for the people; but of course without people there is no ministry. Another theological philosopher has said that ministry is like herding cats. Have you every tried getting just one cat to go where you want him, much less a herd? Trying to get 50 or a 100 cats to all go in the same can be seemingly impossible. But if you think about everyone's own desires and expectations of church and ministry, you might begin to see that it is like herding cats.

Now then, what does all this have to do with our text, with this simple yet profound verse that we have been studying which says, "***Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God***"? Let me remind you that there are two things being emphasized in this verse, the first of which we considered last week, that concern being, are you getting the regular input of the Word of Christ? The word of Christ, the

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essence of the gospel message is to be invading our souls, influencing our thoughts and impacting our lives. We considered just some of the means by which we are to actively, purposely and diligently see the word of Christ be input in our lives through hearing, reading, studying, meditating and memorizing the Word.

The second issue emphasized in our text is the result; what is the right output of the word of Christ? If we were to ask the question, "How can we know if we are rightly inputting the word of Christ in our hearts?" – then the answer would be, "by virtue of its output. What is the word of Christ producing in your life? What are the visible, tangible results of the word of Christ richly dwelling within us? And all of this brings us full circle to my sharing with you the life of a pastor. For here is the truth of this verse; that while God has called some to be pastors and teachers for the general edification or building up of a local body; the purpose of pastors and teachers is ultimately to see the congregation itself do the work of the ministry. This is the declared purpose of God in Ephesians 4:11-13 where we read:

***11 And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, 12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of service [i.e. ministry], to the building up of the body of Christ; 13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.***

Beloved, the ministry of Hope CBC does not belong to a pastor; or to the elders, or to a small group of people that are seemingly the most dedicated of the bunch to do what the others won't participate in. The work of ministry is this entire body's responsibility. Pastors and teachers teach so that you can take the principles and precepts of God's word and apply them not only to your own personal lives, but also to the various ministries of the local church. Is this what we in fact see in our Colossians 3:16 text? What is to be the result of the right input of the word of Christ? What should you be seeing in yourself and in the lives of those with whom you worship as a result of the indwelling word of Christ? And to the broader context of sanctification, of becoming more and more like Christ in conduct and character, what Christlike qualities or activities ought we to see in our lives as a result of spending time in and with the word of Christ?

## **II. Do you have the right output of the word of Christ? (3:16b)**

*...with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.*

In coming to the second half of our verse, we find that there are two spiritual experiences that are to be true for everyone who has the regular input of the word of Christ; and these two experiences might surprise you. So then, I submit to you that if we are regularly inputting the word of Christ into our lives, the inevitable result will be the right and revealed output of the word of Christ, the first of which is your own public witness.

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## A. Public Witness

...with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another...

We read, **“with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another...”** Allow me to introduce this by restating the theme of Colossians 3. Since you have been raised up with Christ to newness of life; having died with Christ to the power and practice of sin; and having your life hidden or wrapped up in the life of Christ; the put on the evidences of that life, the Christlike qualities all summed up in godly love. And to aid you in this process of putting on the evidences of Christlike conduct and behavior (that is sanctification), let the Word of Christ be continually poured into your life (and here is our point); so that you yourselves are teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom. In other words, if you are rightly imputing the Word of Christ, you will, by default, be teaching and admonishing one another – that is your output. This is to be your public witness. Let’s take a closer look at what this means.

### **“With All Wisdom”**

To begin with, notice the close proximity and connection of the phrase, **“the word of Christ”** and **“with all wisdom.”** According to Colossians 2:3, it is in Jesus, **“in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.”** The knowledge and practice of the life of Christ is true wisdom and this is why we need the word of Christ to richly dwell within us. *We cannot know and practice that which we are not constantly exposed to.*

Now many people think that wisdom is something that is only 'philosophical'—something that only goes on in the head. But the Bible teaches that true wisdom is that which transforms the heart and the life as well as the head. A good definition of wisdom is this, it is knowledge put into practice. In our case, wisdom is the knowledge of Christ, who He is, what He is like, understanding His character and conduct; and then emulating, imitating or practicing those very traits. A good description of the sort of the “wisdom” that our text is speaking of can be found back in Colossians 1:9. There we find Paul having rejoiced to hear about these believers’ faith in Christ and their love for all the saints, and then said;

***For this reason, we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray for you, and to ask that you may be filled with the knowledge of His will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding . . .***

We know you know who Jesus is and who God is, but we pray that you know them even better. For Paul, true wisdom and spiritual understanding had its basis in a knowledge of God's will. And as such, it should always be put to work in the everyday experience of practical life. Paul goes on to pray that they would be given such wisdom and spiritual understanding in Colossians 1:10-12 saying,

***10 so that you will walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; 11 strengthened with all power, according to His glorious might, for the attaining of all steadfastness and patience; joyously 12 giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light.***

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True wisdom from God is never simply “head-knowledge.” It's always practical – it is to reveal itself in our lives. It always leads to increased holy living, of becoming more and more like Christ in conduct and character, because it's based on the knowledge of what God tells us in Scripture; His revealed will for the situations and circumstances we face in daily life. Do you want to know how you should act or how you should respond to any given circumstance? Does the Bible actually tell how to respond to any and every circumstance? Yes, it does; it tells us how Jesus responded and therefore how we ought to respond. For example, you know the familiar words of Galatians 5:22 and 23;

**22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.**

Beloved, this is wisdom from God and it is the description of the life of Christ. And so as you are faced with whatever circumstance you find yourself in and you are considering your response, just ask yourself, “Is my response that of love, or joy, or peace, or of patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, or self-control?” If not, then you are not practicing “wisdom” and it would suggest to you that you are not allowing the word of Christ to richly dwell in you.

But the context of our passage is not merely personal. We said it is a matter of public witness. At issue is this, “how do we conduct our church's ministry in a manner that is “in all wisdom”? The answer is plain; we do so by making sure that we are a biblical church. We must work to get one another into the word of God; and see to it that the word of God is lived out in one another's lives. We must be convinced of the truth which Paul told Timothy, that it is **“the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus”** (2 Timothy 3:15). For us, 2 Timothy 3:16-17 has to become more than a doctrinal creed but increasing a part of our conduct. For, **“All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.”**

### **“Teaching and Admonishing One Another”**

Do you want to know if you are becoming more and more like Christ? Do you want to know if you are rightly imputing the word of Christ within you? Then let me ask you, what are you communicating to others about the person and work of Christ? What is your public witness? For notice what our text calls each of us, from the youngest to the oldest; from the smartest to the “not so smart” – we are to be **“teaching and admonishing one another.”** In the Greek text this teaching and admonishing is not a command but rather is the tangible result of lives saturated with the word of Christ. In other words, if you are richly indwelt with the Word of Christ, you will be teaching and admonishing one another. In the context of the local church, we are to be **“teaching”** – that is instructing one another in doctrine and biblical truths; and **“admonishing”** – which speaks of giving verbal warnings and cautions concerning the conduct of one's life – and all of this to **“one another.”** This is your public witness. What are you saying about Jesus to others? Are you speaking **“with all wisdom”** – that is in accordance with what is true about Jesus. Is the conversation of your life the outflow of the regular input of the word of Christ? Or is the outflow of the regular input of the world? The church needs the output of the word of Christ.

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This is what God desires. Is this your pursuit? As one old preacher has put it, *“One of the divinest and most necessary truths is that we must give in order to have. The Word of Christ, in order to secure continuance, must be always leaving us. Go among the mountains, and you will see that it is the living stream that flows away; and where it flows the grass is green, and the flowers bloom, and the cattle drink, and the children linger to dip the foot and hear the song. Yet the spring is in no way exhausted. It is fed by the drawing sun, the condensing mountains, the bountiful clouds, the wide sea. Let your inner life, nourished by the indwelling Word, have not ostentatious and noisy, but natural and continuous expression.”*

What we are being reminded of here in our text is how each one of us as believers are involved in the ongoing sanctification of others in the body. We are being taught that we each have something to contribute to one another’s sanctification. And while nothing that I do can sanctify you and nothing that you do can sanctify me for that is ultimately the work of God, our sanctification is nevertheless incomplete without the contribution we make into one another’s lives. Hear this beloved; we are each to contribute to one another’s sanctification, of becoming more like Christ. This is why it is imperative that we each be faithful, timely and engaging in gathering of the church when it assembles. When someone is absent from the body, or sporadic in their participation, they hinder, they hamper, they slow, they diminish, they rob from not other their own spiritual progress, but also from the spiritual progress of the rest of the congregation. For better or for worse, our sanctification is tied in part one to another. To forget that and to neglect that is akin to skinning your knee, it is spiritual ripping apart of the body.

Notice again that this teaching and admonishing of one another is not to be done without wisdom and it cannot be done if the word of Christ is not richly dwelling in you. The believer who is not spending enough time hearing, reading, studying, meditating and memorizing God’s Word is in sin, plain and simple, He is neglecting the very words of life that brought his salvation and is saying in effect to God, “I don’t care what you have to say to me or to other believers in Christ.” This text does not allow such an option. Every believer has a public witness, good or bad. I pray your desire is for your public witness to be the best it can be as you engage in teaching and admonishing one another.

Now, I can almost hear the theologians among you getting restless. The argument is going along the lines of, “How can you say that we all are to be teaching and admonishing one another! I am not a bible teacher! And what about James 3:1 that says that not many should presume to be teachers?” Let us not be confused here. James 3:1 is talking about the position or office of a teacher and Colossians 3:16 does not call all believers to hold the office of “teacher”, but it does say that every believer, if he or she is being richly indwelt by the word of Christ, will be, by virtue of the power of the word of Christ, **“teaching and admonishing one another.”**

You may argue with me and say that you can’t prepare a lesson and teach a class. But our text is not speaking of teaching a class, but rather of simple living out and sharing the truths of the word of Christ to one another so that you help build up one another’s understanding of the gospel. It means that as you read the word of God, you prayerfully plan to communicate its truths to at least one other person. It means as you memorize God’s Word, you ask others to listen to it as you quote it. It means that as you are faced with a circumstance, personal or that of a friend, you seek to apply a specific truth from God’s Word to that problem. This is to be your own public witness. It is to adopt the attitude of David when he wrote in Psalm 40:9-10;

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**9 I have proclaimed glad tidings of righteousness in the great congregation; Behold, I will not restrain my lips, O Lord, You know. 10 I have not hidden Your righteousness within my heart; I have spoken of Your faithfulness and Your salvation; I have not concealed Your lovingkindness and Your truth from the great congregation.**

Oh may we each be so determined to see the word of Christ richly dwell within us that we are not concealing the lovingkindness and truth of God from the great congregation. But in addition to the experience of public witness, being indwelt with the word of Christ is also to result in a second expression, that of public worship.

### B. Public Worship

*...with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God.*

Often times when we read Colossians 3:16, we conclude that we are to be teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. To be sure, our songs ought to be those that teach and admonish in the things of the Lord; however, I take this to be a separate and second spiritual experience, a second output of the word of Christ richly dwelling in the lives of believers. Just as "**with all wisdom**" speaks of how we are to be teaching and admonishing one another, I take "**with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs**" to be speaking of how we are to be "**singing with thankfulness in [our] hearts to God.**"

As one preacher has noted, "*Christianity would be very dull if it consisted of nothing but sermons.*"<sup>1</sup> As important as communicating right and practical doctrine is to the life of the church, it is equally important that a church is celebrating right and practical doctrine through song. Spiritual experience and spiritual exuberance go hand in hand. One of the reasons why our spiritual experience is lacking is because we do not allow the word of Christ to richly dwell within us; and, if we are doing that, but don't purposefully express it in public worship, our corporate times together will lack enthusiasm and joy. And if the world sees this, how would Christ ever appear attractive to the unsaved? Spurgeon once quipped, "*I believe a very large majority of churchgoers are merely unthinking, slumbering worshipers of an unknown God.*"

When we worship together, our worship is to be in spirit and in truth. Our worship together is to be with the joyful, thankful singing of "**psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.**" As we gather to worship we must not sing as though it has no effect upon those around us. Instead, we must keep in mind that as we sing with thankfulness for the grace of God in our lives, we are actually laying truth before the minds of our fellow believers.

It would appear that the phrase "**psalms, hymns and spiritual songs**" is referring to three different categories of songs; "psalms" – referring to Old Testament praises to God; "hymns" as more New Testament oriented songs of praise to God for Christ and salvation (Colossians 1:15-20; Philippians 2:6-11); and "spiritual songs" as songs speaking more of personal testimony for what God has done. It is interesting to see that right after Paul prays for the Colossians what we read in chapter 1:9-12, that what appears in the text next is what most scholars believe to be a hymn, a song of praise for Jesus Christ that was circulating in the churches at the time. As I read these words, imagine that they might well have been sung or at least read aloud together in the early church as a expression of praise to Jesus Christ:

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<sup>1</sup> Phillips, John, *Exploring Colossians and Philemon*, p. 187

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"... so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything"(Colossians 1:18).

*15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. 16 For by Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities — all things have been created through Him and for Him. 17 He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. 18 He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything. 19 For it was the Father's good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, 20 and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross; through Him, I say, whether things on earth or things in heaven.*

When right doctrine is being preached by means of the word of Christ, then the result is meaningful, expressive and public worship among God's people. To say this another way, "When the buckets of our lives are full to the brim with God's Word, we cannot move without spilling forth in song." Are you tired of hearing Psalm 107:2?

***Let the redeemed of the Lord say so, Whom He has redeemed from the hand of the adversary***

Let those who have been saved by the Lord lift up their voices together in praise and adoration of the God who saves. This text tells to be "singing with thankfulness your hearts to God." The word used for thankfulness implies that you are to sing "by the help of divine grace" or "with grace in your hearts" I think the point is that we must take seriously both the attitude of our singing and the intention of our singing.

Why do you sing? Or better yet, why should you sing? Because a heart that is filled with the word of Christ results in it; because it is an expression of thankfulness to God; it is an evidence of the grace of God at work in your life; and it is an evidence of a heart changed by God. And we sing together in order to publicly testify to one another of the greatness of our God.

So then, I would ask you a question I posed last week, "If your growth in Christlikeness were measured by the quality of your Bible intake, what would be the result?" You should know the answer in part now; the result would be my own increased public witness, speaking to others more and more about Christ, teaching and admonishing them with all wisdom; and, the result should be my own increased public worship, that I seek to praise and worship God more thoroughly, more heartily, knowing that the words and attitudes I offer up to God are used by God to lay truth before the lives of others. So then, ***"Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God."***

*Soli Deo Gloria*

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