

We have spend quite a bit of time thinking about Paul's exhortations concerning Christian character from Colossians 3:12-15. But now we come to verse 16 of chapter 3 which deals with different subject matter. If you're visiting with us, we are working our way systematically through Paul's letter to the Colossians. In most of our preaching we work our way systematically through books of the Bible because we believe that that is the best way to expose ourselves to as much as possible of what God is teaching us in his word. The Bible itself tells us in 2 Timothy 3:16 "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete equipped for every good work."

One of the implications of believing that the Bible is God's inerrant and authoritative word is we seek to submit to its teaching in dependance upon God. One of the things that that means for a preacher is that you always want to preach and teach any given text accurately even if in the process of your study of that text you find out that it is teaching something different than you expected it to teach. I had to submit in this way in connection with the text we are going to consider this evening. I have never preached on this text before and I was expecting it to teach something somewhat different than what it does teach.

So the text reads, "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." I was expecting this text to be about letting the word of Christ dwell in us richly by teaching and admonishing one another and by singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. By that reading, the text would be about three coordinate subjects – teaching, admonishing, and singing. But as I studied it, I came to the conclusion that its about singing and so the idea is that we are to teach and admonish one another by singing. I was hoping that it was about teaching and admonishing and singing, but I had to submit to the conclusion that it is about teaching and admonishing by singing.

And the reason that that is almost certainly the right way to read this text is a parallel passage in Paul's letter to the Ephesians, 5:18-19, which says, "And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit, addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart...." Here Paul speaks of "addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs." That strongly suggests that in our text Paul is telling us to teach and admonish one another by singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. There are, of course, other passages which tell us to teach and admonish one another, by speaking, but the point of this passage is that we are to do that by singing. On the basis of the parallel passage, I believe that our text is about the significance of singing for Christians. This is what most of the commentaries say as well. We are to "Let the word of Christ dwelling in [us], teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom **[by]** singing, psalms and hymns and spiritual songs" The main subject then is singing.

Singing is very important in Christianity. The Bible has many songs and poems and there are many exhortations for Christians to sing. Singing is an important expression of worship and thanksgiving. Singing is an important expression of joy and there are lots of reasons for joy on the part of the people of God. Indeed that heart of all true joy is in the God of our salvation. Singing is also a way of expressing sorrow and anguish. The Psalms have many songs of lament. God as the creator has designed music into the creation which means he created us with the capacity and the urge to sing and life as a follower of God provides many reasons for singing and opportunities for singing.

Now Paul in this text does not carefully describe the context that he has in mind for the singing he is talking about in our text. But the letter as a whole is addressed to the church and so no doubt an important part of what he is saying is that Christians ought to be singing when they gather together as the church. He is certainly envisioning corporate singing because he is telling us to teach and admonish one another by singing. That will certainly include worship services, but the text is general enough to include all kinds of different situations in which Christians sing together. Certainly Paul is thinking about worship services here, but we go further than the text goes if we say that Paul is only thinking about worship services. What Paul is talking about here involves singing in all kinds of situations.

The point of the text, that Christians should teach and admonish one another by singing, sounds somewhat odd to us. Perhaps we imagine a preacher singing his sermon or one Christian singing to another Christian to exhort him or her to be more faithful in their Bible reading. More naturally we can think of a Sunday School teacher or a mother or father teaching their children a song to help memorize the books of the Bible or some of the other kids songs that are often taught to children to teach them the truths of God's word.

But obviously what Paul is taking about here includes more than teaching children although that is one good application of it. Paul is speaking of this teaching and admonishing going on through singing much more generally in the singing of the church. And his point here is that one of the great purposes of our singing as believers is teaching and admonishing one another. The truth here is that singing teaches and admonishes us and that when we sing together we are singing and admonishing one another.

That is a very important insight. The songs that we sing and listen to influence us profoundly. The songs that we sing and listen to shape us profoundly. That is a very significant reason to be very careful about the songs that we sing and that we listen to. There is a lot of music available to us that teaches and admonishes us away from biblical truth and morality. Music and especially the lyrics convey opinions, worldviews, values. They stimulate lusts as well as wholesome desires. Most of the music that the world produces expresses untruth and lies and encourages godlessness and immorality. The truth that Paul is expressing here works both ways. If the songs are rooted in the word of Christ, the teaching and admonishing by singing builds people up towards godliness. If they are rooted in godless worldviews and rebellion against God, the teaching and the admonishing goes in the other direction.

So we must be very careful what we listen to and what we sing and what kinds of songs we allow to be embedded in our memories. There is common grace and there is some secular music that expresses truth and goodness and beauty, but we must be very, very careful when it comes to secular music because the majority of it is anti-God and teaches and admonishes away from God and pleasing him. In the light of this text, think of the music that you listen to and consider what it is teaching you and how it is admonishing you to live.

So Paul is telling us here to “Let the word of Christ dwell in [us] richly, teaching and admonishing one another ... by singing....” We are to teach and admonish one another by singing and as we do that we are to be allowing the word of Christ to dwell in us richly. If we are to teach and admonish one another by singing, we are to be involved in singing together with other Christians. There is a call here for Christians to sing together. That is not news to us, of course, but the point here is that when we do that we are teaching and admonishing one another. We are engaged in something that is a means God has provided for us to teach and admonish one another. Christians singing together has a teaching and admonishing function and we are not just recipients of that teaching and admonishing, we are teachers and admonishers as we sing together.

Now the fact that the teaching and admonishing here is to happen by singing, suggests that that there is an important role for beauty and emotions in learning and growing as Christians. Obviously there is an important place for the mind in learning and growing as Christians and that is not absent in singing, but addressing the mind is pretty much covered by preaching and teaching and admonishing one another that is done simply by speaking. The point I am trying to make is that there is something about singing that is not present to the same degree at least in non-singing teaching and admonishing.

Singing has its own beauty and it has a way of moving us emotionally that is somewhat different than speaking. The distinction is not absolute, because preaching, for instance, can affect us emotionally as well and just meditating on the Bible itself can touch our emotions, but singing takes this to a higher level. Singing teaches us and admonishes us in a way that is not the case in the same way in speaking of the beauty of God and the blessedness of living life to the glory of God.

This is very interesting. The implication of this is that learning and growing in the Christian life involves our emotions as well as our minds. To grow in the knowledge of God and our love of the way of obedience involves delight and joy and savoring the beauty and the glory of God and the rightness and blessedness of obedience. We see this, of course, in the Psalms which are all poetry and designed to be sung as well as read and prayed. Psalm 34:8, “Oh taste and see that the LORD is good!” Tasting is experiential. To speak of tasting and seeing that the LORD is good is to speak of experiencing his goodness – delighting in his goodness – savoring his goodness. Psalm 119:47 says, “I find delight in your commandments, which I love.”

So growing as a Christian involves so much more than just filling our minds with truth, even though that is very, very important. Growing as a Christian also involves growing in love for and delight in God and in his will for our lives. And it is this reality that is behind the relationship between teaching and admonishing one

another and singing. Singing teaches us and admonishes us in ways that speaking cannot do to the same degree. Through singing together with others we are impacted by truth in a way that speaks more directly to our emotions and so we learn and grow through experiencing delight and all the different emotions and experiential aspects of growing as a Christian.

This insight helps us to see why singing is important, but it also helps us to see why we are all called to teach and admonish one another by singing. There is something about singing together that makes a huge difference in the effect that singing has on us. Many of us have experienced the truth of this when we were worshipping exclusively online. No doubt we all felt to some degree that the singing was missing something really important when we were singing just with ourselves, or as a couple or as a family. And the fewer the people the more we felt that the singing did not touch us in the same way as singing as a congregation. We missed singing together as a congregation.

And so this is where we see why Paul tells us be teachers and admonishers of one another by singing. Every voice is important for the teaching and admonishing that Paul is talking about here to take place. Each voice contributes to the emotional experience of singing together – so that we are all contributing to the affect that God intends congregational singing to have us. And one of the wonderful things about this is that we can contribute to the sanctifying effectiveness of singing together regardless of our giftedness in singing.

Those who are good at it help the singing teach and admonish us in very deep ways by helping the singing be beautiful. For instance those who sing harmony contribute wonderfully to the beauty of the singing and that beauty helps the singing do its teaching and admonishing thing in our hearts. Those who can't sing harmony but can hold a tune contribute wonderfully to the beauty of the singing. The beauty of skillful singing contributes to its sanctifying work in our hearts because it touches us in profound ways. But the really cool thing is that that does not take away one bit from the contribution of those who are not so skillful in singing. Even the least skillful singer contributes to the overall affect if they are singing enthusiastically because that enthusiasm contributes its own kind of beauty to the overall experience. The beauty of the lovely sound of skillful singing is mixed with the beauty of a discordant enthusiasm so that the total effect contributes to the sanctifying influence of the singing.

The objective beauty matters, but so does the emotional contribution of every enthusiastic singer. And therein lies our responsibility. In order to truly contribute to the teaching and admonishing one another by singing we need to be engaged emotionally in the singing. The most off-tune singer contributes to the energy if it is a joyful noise unto the Lord. But the person who sings with no enthusiasm takes away from the emotional impact of the singing. And so what Paul is telling us to do here requires effort and engagement on our heart when we sing together. We contribute to the teaching and admonishing of one another by singing when we contribute to making the singing a soul stirring experience. And that is what Paul here is telling us to do. This is one of the ways in which we help one another grow in our love for God and our enthusiasm for living life for

his glory. We help one another to taste and see that the Lord is good. We help one another to grow experientially in love for God and delight in his ways and his will for our lives. And that is a beautiful thing.

And in this light we can understand the first part of the verse which says, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly." As we teach and admonish one another by singing, we are to allow the word of Christ to dwell in us richly. We are active when we teach and admonish one another by singing, but we are also receiving from one another when we are singing together and so we are ministering to others and being ministered to at the same time. And the first part of the verse suggests that being receptive to the word of Christ being ministered to us in song, equips us to minister the word of Christ to others richly. The relationship here between allowing the work of Christ to dwell in us richly and teaching and admonishing one another by singing describes a wonderfully enriching experience in which ministering to others and being ministered to by others is going on at the same time. No wonder singing together is such a rich and edifying experience!

This is such a wonderful clause. "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly..." It requires that the songs that we sing are rich in the word of Christ. That phrase, "the word of Christ" refers ultimately to the whole of the message of the Bible. It can be understood as the word about Christ and it can be understood as the word from Christ and there is no need to decide between them because those two thoughts interpenetrate one another. Paul is speaking about the message about Christ which is also the message from Christ which is the whole word of God.

Jesus taught us that the whole of the OT pointed to him. Think of those wonderful words of Jesus in Luke 24:27 to two of his followers on the road to Emmaus, "And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself." Paul in Romans 10:17 wrote, "So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ." One of the ways that faith comes and is strengthened is when the word of Christ dwells in us richly as we minister to others and are ministered to others in the singing of the church. In 1 Corinthians 1:17 Paul writes that Christ had send him to preach the gospel. And in verse 18 he writes, "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." That powerful word of the cross is ministered to us in the singing of the church as well as in the preaching of the gospel. In 1 Thessalonians 1:8 he refers to it as the word of the Lord and in 1 Thessalonians 2:13 he refers to it as the word of God. And in 1 Thessalonians 4:15 he refers to it as a word from the Lord.

The word of Christ is the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. It is the good news of the forgiveness of sins through faith in Jesus. It is the good news of the new life that believers receive in Christ so that they begin to live the life that is true life. It is the good news that involves not only individuals and not only all the people of God, but the renewal of all things and so hope in the promised new heavens and new earth.

Paul says, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly" and he is talking about singing. The singing of the church is one of the ways that the word of Christ dwells in us richly. The word of Christ dwells in us in other ways, but

here Paul is talking about singing. And we know what he means when we think of how the psalms and hymns and spiritual songs dwell deep in our memories and become part of the fabric of our hearts so that when we sing them they touch us richly and deeply.

Paul also mentions that we are to teach and admonish one another in all wisdom. That happens when the songs that we sing express the word of Christ. Paul has taught earlier in Colossians, 2:3, that “all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” are hidden in Christ. Wisdom is the fear of the Lord. Wisdom is about skill in living because we have been shaped and molded and matured by the word of Christ. Remember how Paul had written earlier in this letter, 1:27, of “the riches of the glory of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory” and continued in 1:28, “Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ.”

Letting the word of Christ dwell in us richly through teaching and admonishing one another and being taught and admonished by one another in song is one of the means that Christ uses to give us wisdom and thus maturity. Again that involves more than filling our heads with truth, as important as that is, it involves growing in love for Christ and his will for our lives and so singing is part of the way that maturity and wisdom is nurtured.

Paul mentions three kinds of songs that are to be used in the singing he is speaking about in this verse, psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. There are those who believe that this refers to three kinds of psalms, but very few solid Christian interpreters are convinced of the arguments to support that conclusion. This verse certainly exhorts us to sing the Psalms of the OT. They are a most rich part of the word of Christ which is to dwell in us richly through our singing. But just as God expects the teaching of the church to restate the truth of the word of God rather than only read it and just as God expects the prayers of the church to express our worship and petitions in words that come from our hearts so we are encouraged to sing of Christ and salvation in him, not only in the OT language of the Psalms, wonderful though that is, but also in creative lyrics that accurately convey the word of Christ in song. Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs speak of a rich diversity in the singing of the church. The NT itself contains many parts of hymns and spiritual songs that reflect the earlier creativity of the church in its songs.

Rather than being restrictive, Paul is using these three words, psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to encourage the church to produce a rich and varied library of song – to use the creativity of gifted lyricists and musicians to help the church fulfill this mandate of teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom by singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs. What is very important from this verse, however, is that by the singing of them, the word of Christ will dwell in us richly.

That suggests songs that are substantial – loaded with the glorious truth of Christ. There are Christian songs that are filled with error or that are superficial and sentimental. There are many Christian songs out there that do not pass the test of this verse in helping the people of God to “let the word of Christ dwell in [them] richly.”

So we must be discriminating even with Christian music. But thankfully there is a great deal of music that satisfies this criterion of letting the word of Christ dwell richly in the minds and hearts of the people of God.

So let us sing. There is so much reason for us to sing as Christians. God is our God and we are his people. God is our Father and we are his children. Jesus died for us on the cross and rose from the dead and we died and rose with him and so we have eternal life. Let us sing with all our hearts so that whether skillful or not we contribute to this wonderful ministry of teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom by singing so that we help one another let the word of Christ dwell in us richly.