

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, August 23 2020**

WHATEVER YOU DO (5)

Colossians 3:15-17

Recently I've told you about some of my life's most embarrassing moments ... when I fell off the high bar in gym class, when I passed out right after the first time I donated blood, and when I was the black sheep among a sea of priests all dressed in white at a Catholic girls' school graduation. Here is another episode in the saga of my most embarrassing moments.

It happened when I was 10 or 11 years old. I grew up out in the country in northwestern PA. *Way out* in the country. Our house was at a crossroads called Smith's Corners – appropriately named since, at one time, there were Smiths living on all four corners. Smith's Corners is three miles from the nearest village – Rockland – which had an elementary school, a general store, a gas station, a volunteer fire station, our church, and maybe two dozen houses. The two nearest towns, Oil City and Franklin, were about 12 and 14 miles away. Mom would drive into town (Franklin, usually) once a week to do our family grocery shopping and any other shopping errands.

One summer morning when I was 10 or 11, I was riding my bicycle to Rockland. It was a one-speed cruiser. It may have had a basket on it. I don't remember. I think I was on my way to Vacation Bible School. As I often did, I took a shortcut through a farm that belonged to a family we knew. There was a long lane leading up to their house and barn, and then a path through one of the pastures that eventually connected with the main road. I had taken this shortcut lots of times. It cut off most of a long hill that I tried to avoid. On this occasion, though, I ran into a problem. It seems that the farmer had put in an electric fence that went across the path. I didn't see the fence. I know that may be hard to believe, but I really didn't see it. I rode my bike straight into the fence. Fortunately it was *not* barbed wire. That could have been awful. As it was, I gashed my right arm on the fence and fell to the ground.

I picked myself up, took note of the fence I had never seen before, and noticed that my arm was bleeding. I was about a mile and a half from home. I had failed to bring my cell phone with me ☺, so I couldn't call Mom. I was too embarrassed to go to the farmhouse and explain what had happened. So I got back on my bike and rode home. I told Mom what had happened. She looked at my arm and determined I would need stitches. Which I did. She took me to our family doctor, who stitched me up.

I still have a scar on my right arm to remind me of that day. I won't roll up my sleeve and show you right now, but if you want to see it, just ask me and I will show you.

Sometimes, in some situations, for some things, there are no shortcuts. In this particular instance, there was a shortcut. And then there wasn't. But in some things – this is especially true in spiritual matters – there are no shortcuts. There are no shortcuts on the road to becoming spiritually mature followers of Jesus.

There is no shortcut to peace with God or peace with others. If you want the peace of Christ to govern your relationships, there are no shortcuts. If you are committed to peace in the body of Christ, it takes work. It takes effort. It requires vigilance. It requires making sure you clothe yourself in the spiritual wardrobe of a Christian character. It involves taking off and getting rid of the kinds of things that destroy unity – things like ungodly anger, rage, malice, slander, gossip, lying, bitterness, envy, covetousness, resentment, grudges, impatience, unforgiveness, greed, lustful desires, pride, and selfishness in every size and shape. Maybe you don't struggle with any of these things; praise God! More likely, you do, with at least a few of them, maybe more. If you are in Christ, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:17, you are a new creation. You are a new person in and through the power of Christ. But the old sinful nature doesn't give up easily. You may have to be on guard or wrestle against certain characteristics of your old sinful nature for years. Or as long as you live.

There are no shortcuts to sanctification, this ongoing process by which we are being renewed, refined, and conformed to the character of our Savior. It requires vigilance, a daily putting off of anything and everything that is displeasing to God, and a daily dependence on the Holy Spirit to cultivate the fruit of the Spirit.

There are no shortcuts to the kind of life and relationships God desires for us. As we saw last Sunday, Paul says in Romans 14 that we must “make every effort to do what leads to peace and to mutual edification” (14:19). He says in Ephesians 4:3 that we must “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” A continuous effort to treat every member of the body with love, care, prayer, dignity, and respect is necessary for the health and well-being of the body of Christ. Relationships take work, even in the age of coronavirus. Maybe especially in the age of coronavirus. There are no shortcuts. Take it from me: If you insist on finding a shortcut where there is none, you will crash and burn. You will hurt yourself. You will hurt others. You will hurt the church.

You must daily decide to let the peace of Christ rule in your heart. If the peace of Christ is to rule in your heart, then Christ Himself must rule in your heart. Unless Jesus is at the center of your life, unless He is seated as Sovereign on the throne in your heart, unless He is in the driver's seat of the car, truck, minivan, SUV, or whatever you imagine to be the vehicle of your life, you will not have His peace. You may feel His peace momentarily, but you will not have His peace consistently. If you want the peace of Christ to rule in your heart and relationships, then Christ Himself must rule in your heart.

It is through Jesus and what He has done for us that we have peace with God. It is through the work of the Holy Spirit and our participation with the Spirit in our sanctification that we grow in grace and godliness, and so increasingly exhibit the grace-filled character of our Savior in our lives and relationships with others.

There is no shortcut to healthy, grace-and-peace-filled relationships. Such relationships take time. They take prayer. They take work. They take compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. They take forbearance and forgiveness. They take love. But you know what? They are worth it. Because *you* are worth it. *The church* is worth it.

So, let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you (*we*) were called to peace. And while you're at it, Paul says, be thankful (3:15).

An attitude of gratitude is another piece of the wardrobe of a Christ-like character. There is never a time when it is not time to give thanks to God. Take it from actor Denzel Washington. He has been in dozens of movies, including *Glory*, *Malcolm X*, *The Pelican Brief*, *The Preacher's Wife*, and *Remember the Titans*. Who can forget the Titans? Washington played Coach Herman Boone, who led a newly-integrated TC Williams High School football team to the Virginia state championship in 1971. Among his other movie credits are *Training Day* (for which he won an OSCAR), *Inside Man*, *The Book of Eli*, and *Fences*.

At a church banquet a few years ago, Washington, whose father was a pastor, urged his audience to “give thanks for blessings every day. Every day. Embrace gratitude. Encourage others. It is impossible to be grateful and hateful at the same time. I pray that you put your slippers way under your bed at night, so that when you wake in the morning you have to start on your knees to find them. And while you're down there, say ‘thank you.’ A bad attitude is like a flat tire. Until you change it, you're not going anywhere.” (Source: Christian Post, 11/12/2015)

I don't know how many of you wear slippers, especially in the summer. Whether you do or not, it is good and right to start the day by counting your blessings and saying “Thank You” to God. And it is always right and good to take time at the end of the day to thank God for all His mercies and grace.

Being thankful is so important that Paul actually mentions it three times in these verses. In verse 15, he says: “And be thankful.” It almost sounds like an afterthought. But he mentions it again in verse 16 as he talks about worship. And then he reinforces it in verse 17: “Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through Him.” Whatever you do, make sure you don't forget to be thankful, and to tell God what you're thankful for.

In verse 16, Paul shifts from the peace of Christ and thankfulness to the centrality of the Word and worship in our lives as followers of Jesus: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom, and as you sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs with gratitude in your hearts to God.”

Here is how it reads in *The Message*: “Let the Word of Christ – the Message” (i.e., the whole of the gospel) “– have the run of the house. Give it plenty of room in your lives. Instruct and direct one another using good common sense. And sing, sing your hearts out to God!”

Does the Word of Christ – the message of the Bible – dwell in you richly? Do you know what God has to say in His Word about the issues you're dealing with in your life? Does the Word of God live in you? Do you spend time in it regularly? Daily? Do you turn to God's Word for spiritual insight, guidance, direction, encouragement, and strength each day? Do you look to the Bible to be “a lamp for (your) feet and a light for (your) path” (Psalm 119:105)?

There are no easy shortcuts to spiritual maturity. To develop a Christ-like character requires spiritual discipline. It requires engagement in the spiritual disciplines of the Christian life, chief among them being prayer and the study of God's Word.

Most of us eat three times a day. Some of us eat more often than that. Our bodies don't get enough nourishment or energy unless we eat a healthy diet of (usually) three meals a day. Imagine if you tried to go for an entire week eating only one meal. Not one meal a day, but one meal for an entire week. That, unfortunately, is what some church people do. They try to survive on one spiritual meal a week – the meal they get from God's Word on Sunday morning. I hope this is not true of you. I hope no one listening to my voice fits into this category. You need – we *all* need – to be reading and reflecting on God's Word and learning from it every day.

Don't let the Word of Christ dwell in you scarcely. Don't let it dwell in you meagerly. Let it dwell in you richly. Abundantly. Plentifully. Don't confine the Word of God to a tiny corner of your house or a tiny amount of time. Especially now in the age of COVID, when so many of our previously-normal activities have either been restricted or are just not happening, but not just now in the age of COVID, block out an appointment time each day to meet with God for prayer and the reading of His Word. It will not be time wasted.

Just as there are no shortcuts to spiritual maturity, there are no shortcuts to a meaningful, God-exalting life of worship. Paul talks specifically in verse 16 about the role of singing in worship. He mentions "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs." The Greek word for psalm (are you ready for this?) is *psalms*. The word for hymn is *hymnos* or *humnos*. The words translated "spiritual songs" are *odais pneumatikais* – literally, "spiritual odes." Three different terms, but it is probably not wise to try to make some kind of sharp distinction between them. They all refer to songs of praise and adoration, gratitude and trust, commitment and consecration, faith and hope, surrender and service – all as expressions of worship to the One who alone is worthy of our worship. Traditional hymns, the Psalter used in some Christian traditions, gospel music, and contemporary worship songs all fit under the umbrella of "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs."

There are no shortcuts to authentic worship. There is more to worship than singing. Much more. I wish we could sing freely and loudly together in our Worship services at church. We can't right now. I hope we will be able to do so soon. But even if we can't sing here at church, we can still worship God with heart and soul and mind and strength. We can still sing at home. We can sing in our cars. We can sing outdoors. We can sing in private, even if we can't sing in public. I want us to be able to sing together at church. But until we can, don't let it keep you from singing to the Lord as you go through your day. If you can sing out loud, go for it. If your circumstances are such that you can only sing in your heart, sing in your heart to the Lord. If you can listen to "psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs" on your favorite electronic device (and maybe even sing along), go for it. Make worship part of the routine of your daily life.

As God speaks to you from His Word, as He blesses and encourages you as you take time for His Word, for prayer and worship, share the blessings and lessons He is teaching you with one another.

There are no shortcuts. It takes focus. It takes discipline. It takes time. It takes humility. It takes a heart for God.

Like the hill on the Rockland Road, sometimes you can't avoid the hills that require intense effort.

Whatever you do, whether in word or in deed, let every detail in your life – words, actions, whatever – be done in the name of the Lord Jesus, thanking God the Father every step of the way (adapted from Colossians 3:17, *MSG*).

Lord, let it be so in us. Amen.