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The Work of the People

A Liturgy for the Church

By Taylor Swedberg
Dr. Tom Moore, Advisor
June 3, 2003



HONORS THESIS

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Literally, the word “liturgy” means “the work of the people.” It is a word commonly used to describe the organization of how to celebrate the Eucharist. This organization at the most basic levels may be nothing more than two people agreeing on a time and a place to meet, but almost always, as is the case with the liturgy I organized, it consists of much more. Before I get to ahead of myself, though, I think it is important for me to note that I suspect that this liturgy I have organized is not complete. That is, it is a complete service, but I do not believe that it has finished its maturing process. I think if in six months or six years or a lifetime, I were to look at the words, the order of service and the physical layout of the space contained in this work, I would think some parts of it were simply wrong and should not be included at all, or should at least be altered in some way. The reason for my thinking that my liturgy has not fully matured, is that my personal theology has not fully matured, and liturgy is a way of acting out a theology. I don’t know if my theology will ever fully mature. I honestly don’t even know what it means for a theology to “fully mature.” Nonetheless, I do have a theology today, and the liturgy I organized is a direct result of my beliefs about who I am in relation to God. This relationship is demonstrated symbolically in many ways throughout the service, including the organization of the space of worship, the sounds of the worship, and the actions of worship.

For example, the worship space in this liturgy consists primarily of the altar in the front center, the pulpit back and a little to the right, and the worship leader back a little to the left. The pews or chairs in the congregation are set in curved rows, slightly more curved than what is common in many sanctuaries today, and all of them are facing the altar. I placed the altar in the center because I think it is important to remember the

sacrifice Jesus made on the cross for his children. As I read through the history of liturgy and saw how people organized their worship in the early church, I was struck by how simple it was and how different it was from today. In the early church people mostly got together to remember Jesus. They did this by eating meals together and praying together and singing hymns together. It seemed like it wasn't for a long time that any kind of sermon was given much attention at all. The focus of the gathering was much more on remembering Jesus and being together. By placing the altar in the front and center of the worship space I have given it the prominent role in the space and let it serve as a visual aid in remembering the primary reason for why we are gathered together.

I did not put the pulpit in the center because I don't think real Christian life or community begins with the word. Words are good, powerful, convicting, and encouraging, but I don't think real spiritual growth starts there. The words won't mean anything until we have understood the meaning and reality of the cross that words alone can never bring us to. The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing. Conversion and growth start with understanding the reality and importance of the sacrifice Jesus Christ made for all on the cross. Only after understanding the reality of Jesus can the message become the power of God. So the first reason why the altar has the prominent position in the worship space is that it is a symbolic reminder of the reality of Jesus, which is the only place real worship can begin.

Second, the altar gets the prominent position in order to instill a sense of anticipation in the congregation. For the majority of the duration of the service the altar is left alone in the center of the space and communion is never engaged in. The congregation knows exactly what is coming. Their chairs are all pointed directly at the

altar. During worship, and during the sermon, the chairs are still pointed toward the altar. The altar is thus continually on the forefront of the entire congregation's mind (ideally) and because of this, they can sing worship rightly, and listen to the word and the word will not be foolishness or empty. Also, the feeling of anticipation serves a double role in this service. Not only does the congregation anticipate the actual physical eating of the body and drinking of the blood, but they anticipate the final days when Jesus will return. The congregation thus recognizes the work done on the cross for the forgiveness of sins, and also anticipates the completion of that work with the returning of Jesus. Essentially, the feeling of anticipation for the physical, weekly communion should serve as a shadow or a hint or a reminder of the anticipation we should feel for the return of Jesus.

It is also important to mention briefly the placing of the seating for the congregation. The slightly exaggerated curve of the rows serves three functions. One, as already stated, is that the curved shape allows the congregation to face and anticipate the coming communion meal. But also, the exaggerated curve implies a half circle in a way that still accommodates large numbers of people. The half circle is important because it allows people to look at each other and interact with each other during worship. They can't forget that they are in community. Again, the early church was very focused on remembering Jesus' work on the cross and subsequent resurrection, and also on the communality of eating together. Also, curving the chairs creates, hopefully, a feeling that the gathering is not just a show to watch, but a genuine, intentional community of people seeking to remember Jesus, encourage, and help one another.

In addition to the importance of the physical layout of the space of worship, the sounds of the liturgy are also important. The sounds of worship are probably the most

noticeable and clear mood indicators and manipulators. That is, every gathering of Christians is going to come to God in a slightly different way. Some are loud and excited, while others are more contemplative and quite. The sounds of worship that the leadership in the gathering produce, are indicators to the congregation of what kind of tone the gathering desires to come to God with. The reason I say that the sound of worship that a certain gathering produces is also a manipulator is that people generally follow the tone of worship set before them. When the music is loud and fast, one is bound to see more people clapping and engaged in worship of God with each other and the community. There might even dancing at some gatherings. However, when the music is slow, it is likely one will see more people with their eyes closed, sitting, heads bowed in a more personal, less interactive with the congregation, style of worship. It is hard to get up and dance to a very slow, contemplative song, and I suspect many people really would have no desire to do so. So when I say that the sounds of worship can be manipulative I mean to say that the volume, subject matter and tone of a certain song are going to aid the congregation in worshipping in that same tone and volume etc. and if they desire to worship in another way, then it will be hard for them, and they will probably find themselves liking the tone another gathering has to offer better. With that said, I will now examine the tone I attempted to create in my liturgy.

I chose to have worship lead with just an acoustic guitar and one vocal, for a number of reasons. First, I wanted the music to have a very bare sound. This is probably just a personal aesthetic preference more than anything else because I like the simple sound of acoustic guitar and voice. But the bare, stripped down, sound of just a guitar seems more honest in some ways to me. I understand perfectly that one can rightly

worship God in the presence of drums, but I think our society needs more silence right now. Our world is loud, and too often we can't hear God over the noise. I want this gathering to emphasize the great importance of silence for understanding God and, in turn, ourselves. Also, I chose this simple way of leading worship because I did not want the service to feel like a show. I have seen some great choirs and great worship bands in my life, and I don't think I have ever gone to a service that didn't have one or the other. The problem with worship bands is they make me personally think of all the concerts I have gone to to be entertained, and church is about not about entertainment. It is about participating in community and remembering Jesus. In the same way, I did not include a choir in my liturgy because I wanted the congregation to feel like the choir. Essentially, I wanted the smallest number of people on the stage as possible, in order to encourage those attending the service to feel like it was *their* community and not pre-established community they were coming to watch.

The actual songs I chose to be played at the service were also important and handpicked for a reason. Of the eight songs sung at the service, six were either hymns or renditions of hymns. I chose to work closely with this style of music in the liturgy mostly for the depth of the words. I think too often today worship songs get away with saying almost nothing. They don't challenge us or say anything interesting about God. Many hymns, on the other hand, aside from sounding beautiful, have very rich meaning that carries solid theology. They will never let us leave the cross or the majesty of God, and I love them for that fact. I envisioned this liturgy to fully embrace the truth and power of the gospel and not shy away from any part of it, and hymns are a good tool for enabling the true gospel to be proclaimed.

Also, as is clear, all the words to the songs (as well as the scripture) in this liturgy are in English. This was not just a default because it was easier to write in English than, say, Latin. I wrote in the vernacular because the gospel is good news for everybody and most people don't know Latin. I see no need to try to add to the mystery of God by translating his words into a language I don't understand. God will always be mysterious to people simply because of the nature of our relationship to him while we are here on earth. He doesn't need our help to be mysterious on his own, and therefore I will not speak to the members of my congregation in strange languages in order to manufacture in them a completely useless confusion, which I can in turn pass off for some holy sense of "mystery." The popular language, in this case English, will work just fine.

I should add one final note, before I move from my comments on space and sound, to comments on the organization of the liturgy. While the arrangement of space and sound in this liturgy has been done very carefully and intentionally, none of it is necessary. Every part of this liturgy is one method of communing with God, and if, in another community of believers, another method of worship is more relevant or appropriate, then by all means that method should be used just so long as it is in keeping with the same biblical principles that the methods of this liturgy are attempting to uphold. And now on to the organization of the liturgy.

The service is divided into five parts in this order: adoration, confession, assurance of pardon, proclamation, and response. I learned of this structure in talking to Doug Bunell, a Presbyterian pastor here in Bellingham. He said it is a common structure for all Presbyterian churches, but he didn't know if other orders followed exactly the same progression or not. The structure is taken from *Isaiah, Chapter 6*, in which the

prophet comes face to face with the angel of God. Bunell did not know if this structure was normative throughout scripture, or if this was simply one good way to approach God that was demonstrated in the Bible. Either way, I recognized the importance of each section and decided to utilize this bare, traditional form and then fill in my own words in each section.

The service opens with members of the congregation greeting one another to recognize the fact that they are about to worship in a community of believers. After this brief time, the congregation is lead in two songs of adoration. I think it is right to start a service with adoration of God, because without seeing God rightly (that is, as a good and loving God who deserves adoration) nothing else that follows in the service will make sense. Why would we want to confess to an unloving God? Why would we want to hear the word of an unjust God proclaimed? Why would we feel assured that our sins were forgiven if we were told by a lying God? So, setting our hearts right before God, and seeing him rightly is of utmost importance and is necessarily at the very beginning of the gathering. After two songs of adoration are sung, *Colossians 1:15-20* is read aloud, proclaiming the surpassing greatness of Christ, and enabling the congregation to hear the works and character of their God, and thus adore Him better. This passage is followed immediately by *Psalms 63:3*, which reads, "Lord, because your love is better than life, our lips will glorify you." Again, motivating adoration. Finally, the time of adoration is concluded with two more songs. Music is especially appropriate in adoration because when people are happy they like to sing, and the works of our God in our lives should make us happy.

After this opening time of adoration, *1 John 1:5-10* is read aloud, moving the congregation into a time of confession. It is an excellent passage to use because, not only is it profound, but it shows logically how sin separates us from this perfect God that deserves all our adoration. The passage begins by claiming that “God is light; in him there is no darkness at all.” There is our starting place: the adoration of God. However, the passage immediately moves from the greatness of God, to the falseness of man, declaring, “If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth.” After the adoration of God and the recognition of God’s goodness, a recognition of our sin is of utmost importance. If we do not recognize our sinful nature, then we have no need for a savior. Without recognizing our sin, we have nothing to be saved from, and consequently God is transformed from a great redeemer to a mere friend or blessing machine, which will not be of much comfort in the real trials of life—especially when the “blessings” aren’t coming. Soon, without the recognition of our sin, God becomes irrelevant. So at the very beginning of every service, we recognize the great depth of our sin, in order to understand, at least partially, how far Christ had to come to save us.

After the *1 John* passage, there is silence for personal reflection and prayer so that each member can have time to recognize his condition before God, and in turn confess his sin. Then *Psalms 65:3* is read, proclaiming the forgiving character of God. It says, “When we were overwhelmed by sins, you forgave our transgressions.” This assurance is followed by a prayer given by the pastor on behalf of the congregation. The function of the scripture and prayer is not only to assure the congregation of its pardon (which is the third section of the liturgy) but also to bring each member back out of his or her

personal prayer time in order to recognize the condition of the community at large. Ideally, when the members realize they have all been forgiven of their deepest, most offensive sins, it will bind them together even closer as a community willing to suffer together for their redeemer, and also it will cause them to realize they have in common with each other the deepest truth about themselves—their mutual salvation. And within this sense of community the congregation will sing together a song proclaiming their great savior and his work on the cross, recognizing their assurance of pardon.

After the gospel song, the word is proclaimed. The proclamation of the word is the fourth of the five sections in this liturgy, coming after adoration, confession, and assurance of pardon, and before the response. The proclamation of the word is important because the word of God is one of the most important ways that God communicates with his people. *2 Timothy 3:16* tells us that, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.” That is, scripture is good and has many good uses. Therefore, it deserves a high place in the liturgy so that the pastor can teach, rebuke, correct and train his congregation. The proclamation of the word should contain at its center the gospel of the work of Christ on the cross. I understand that this message has been heard many times by most Christians, but it can never be heard enough. The day the work of Jesus Christ takes a back seat to morality or tradition or anything else, is the day the church has lost its life and its purpose. People need to be reminded constantly of the simple truth of the gospel because we all have a way of talking ourselves into being “basically good” people, which we never are. The word of the Lord is a powerful weapon. It breaks our hearts and shows us truth and leads us to the narrow gate of salvation.

The proclamation of the word is also a good time for the congregation to see an example of how to correctly interpret the Bible. Christians are called to be exceptionally literate. We need to understand the difference between hyperbole and metaphor and parable and countless other literary devices and genres in order to be able to read the Bible the way it was intended to be read. The pastor, in this time of proclamation, has the opportunity to show the congregation how to use these devices properly.

After the proclamation of the word, the final section of the liturgy entered, the response, is entered with a prayer given by a member of the congregation including both thanksgiving and supplication. This prayer is a response to the deep love of God, which was proclaimed in the sermon. It is given by a member of the congregation because I want as much of the action of the service to take place among members of the congregation as possible, again, to promote the feeling of intentional community. I want all the members of the congregation to be able to contribute to the gathering. It might be song, or a prayer, or an offering, but none of them will be able to say they had no opportunity to participate in the service. It is not supposed to be a show to watch. This prayer contains thanksgiving and supplication because I remember hearing in a sermon at my home church that a good prayer can include adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication. The service opened with adoration, then went into a time of confession (both individually and communally) and now is the time for thanksgiving and supplication, making the whole service a kind of long prayer to God, given by the entire congregation.

Other than prayer, members of the congregation are encouraged to respond to God through the Offering. Before the actual act of offering begins passages of scripture

from *Romans 12* are read describing how we should respond to God, what we should give and why we should give it. The passages talk about giving what we have first been given, that is, using our gifts to bring glory to God. Before being encouraged to give, however, this passage gives the reason why we should give. It is in view of God's mercy that we should offer our bodies as living sacrifices to God. He has given us life; we should use that life to his glory out of gratitude. After the scripture is read, an offering of money is taken up. We collect money because it is a good symbol of ourselves. We value money greatly in our society because it symbolizes our time, and the money we give away is money we could have spent on something else. It is a sacrifice. It is a fitting response to the mercy of God. The offering is not, however, given to the church. It is given to God, and the church should use that money in the way that glorifies God the most.

A written prayer is then read by the pastor in front of the congregation. This prayer is a combination of *Romans 12:1*, *John 3:16*, and *Isaiah 53:5-6*. It is intended to outline why we are responding to God by highlighting the sacrifice Christ made for us at the cross. I think written prayer (as well as scripture) is an important part of the liturgy because it is the same every week, or at least often enough that the congregation can memorize what is coming. The intent of allowing the congregation to memorize prayer is not to enable them to passively mouth words they have said every week for as long as they can remember. Written prayer is intended to give the congregation an opportunity to meditate on what they are saying and come to a deeper understanding of what they are saying. It also gives the members an opportunity to study before the service what they are going to say in the service, to see if they agree with the words. Then the congregation

can listen, or sing, or pray more confidently to their God, and they don't have to be always checking to see if the words they are saying are right.

The Lord's prayer is next, and serves as another example of a written, pre-approved prayer. Jesus told us we should pray this way, and while they may not have meant those exact words, they are nonetheless exceedingly good words which deserve to be prayed by the body. Also, it is yet another time the congregation can participate actively in the service, recognizing their community and coming together under the same God and the same struggles with sin. This prayer is followed by a reading of *1 Peter 2:24*, which states, "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed." I put this passage in the service because I think it is beautiful and powerful. It took Jesus' death to give me life, and this fact of our faith deserves and demands proclamation. Also, this scripture continues to make the congregation dwell on Christ's work and sacrifice at the cross, and leads us directly into the act of communion, where we can remember his broken body and poured out blood and come close to the almighty God.

I chose *1 Corinthians 11:23-26* to bring the congregation into communion because most of this passage contains Jesus' own words. When this passage is read, we can hear how Jesus wanted us to come to him and remember him. Also, aside from containing a direct quote from Jesus, which the gospel accounts do as well, this passage begins with, "on the night he was betrayed." This is an extremely powerful way to begin the passage that is supposed to outline Jesus' sacrifice for all believers. It is as if to say, Jesus knew how people would respond to his incredible sacrifice. He knew that humans love darkness. He knew that humans would be the ones to crucify him. He knew that

one of his twelve closest friends would betray him to the cross—and because of his great love for us, he went anyway. The commitment of Jesus says something powerful about his character, and offers us a good example of how we too should forgive because we were forgiven.

After this passage is read, communion is to be explained and begun. I have set up the action in such a way that it can be at once individual and communal. I think both are important because it is a meal that is to be shared together in community, but it is also an intensely personal time in which one comes before God and must examine himself. I believe it is hard to personally examine oneself in an interactive group setting. Therefore, I have set up communion to begin with prayer and silence so that people can confess to God and get right before Him, before they approach the table. Also, there are no ushers leading people to the table. The members of the congregation are expected to approach the table when they are ready. All of these aspects of communion are intended to emphasize the personal nature of coming before God. However, as already mentioned, this is a meal, and should be enjoyed in community. To achieve the communal aspect of communion I planned that after a member is ready to take communion, he or she gets out of their seat and line up in the middle aisle with other members of the congregation. So, at this point, each member has had ample time to prepare himself to come before God, and he has now joined a gathering line of people, from which he can take communion in a feeling of community. Also, halfway through the communion time a song is to be sung by the congregation. This song should dwell on some aspect of communion in order to bring the congregation to a deeper understanding of the event, and also this song serves as another tool to emphasize the community aspect of communion. Where once all

members were praying silently to God, now all members are praying aloud, through song, together to God.

Communion is at the end of the service because it is the climax (almost) of the gathering. I say almost, because I think the scripture read from *1 Peter 1:3* after communion is over, should very get the place of climax in the service. This passage exclaims the resurrection of Christ from the dead. I think too often, Christians dwell on the cross for too long, without coming to the resurrection, but the resurrection is everything. Without the resurrection, Jesus was just another man who had no power over death or sin. He would not be God, and the entire gospel would be no good news at all. The victory of Christ over the grave is the true climax of this gathering.

Finally, a closing song is sung by the congregation proclaiming the name of Jesus and the truths learned throughout the gathering. This song is another time for responding to God out of sheer joy for the new life we have in him. After the song, the congregation is sent on its way with a benediction from *Jude 24-25*. A benediction is a way of proclaiming the grace of God to the congregation and a way of proclaiming one final time the name of the Lord. I chose *Jude* over other benedictions in the Bible because it sounds the most victorious to me, and unabashedly praises God.

I thought through this entire service very carefully, and everything that was done, was done for a purpose. Nonetheless, now that I have actually presented the service before a congregation there are a few aspects of the service I would change. First, I don't like how much during the service, I (in the pastor's role) had to get up and sit back down for only a small reading. I think it made the service feel more disjointed than it should have been, and heavy with transitions. Also, my roommate commented that at times the

service felt a little bit too light or possibly irreverent. I attribute a lot of this to the fact that I had to get up and down so many times from the pulpit. I wanted to do it quickly so that there would not be disjointed, awkward transitions, but I think at times it may have looked like I was just hopping around on the stage, jumping from one thing to the next on the list, without contemplating what I was saying or really fearing God.

I don't know exactly how I would fix this problem. I could have the worship leader read more scripture since he is already up on the stage and has a microphone, but I think it is important to spread the responsibilities of the service among many people to promote the feeling of a true body, and the more the worship leader does himself, the more the service is a show watching the worship leader. Another option is that I could sit on the stage so that I would be closer to the pulpit and would not have to approach it as quickly. Less movement from me would also make transitions smoother. I am not sure if I want to be seated on the stage, though, for symbolic reasons. I want to sit with the congregation to show that I am not the exception to the rule. I am not exempt from the power of sin. I am a man, who struggles with the same issues as other men, and I do not deserve to be placed on a stage. That being said, maybe the stage would be the best solution. Yes, there is symbolic weight, but if sitting on the stage makes the service better I see no reason not to do it. Our position before God is never about what we do or where we sit, but about our hearts. If my heart is right, then I am sitting rightly.

One final aspect of the service I might change would be the benediction at the end. I love the truth and power of the words in the benediction from *Jude*, but further research has shown that many churches traditionally use a benediction from *Numbers 6:24-26*, which states, "The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine

upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.”

I would consider changing to this benediction because these words are actually attributed directly to God. This is how God instructed Moses to tell Aaron to bless the Israelites.

The words of *Jude* are very good, and I believe they are God-breathed, but if we have access to direct commands from God, I see every reason to use those.

Overall, I am happy with the way this liturgy has turned out, although I think it might be a little idealistic. I am not sure if the members of the congregation will always fully recognize the symbolic weight of what they are doing. I don't know if that is the point, though, either. The point is remembering Jesus and enjoying the community of his body. If constantly trying to understand complex symbolism gets in the way of simply enjoying God, then the symbolism has failed. My hope is that each member would take in what he or she can from the service, and that those things would help them worship God better.

The Only Thing that Counts

Preached from the pulpit of Breakwater Community Church
on May 14, 2003 by Taylor Swedberg

I thought, since I am presenting a liturgy tonight, that it would be appropriate to speak in the sermon as to what exactly counts in a liturgy—what matters and what doesn't matter, what a liturgy is and what it is not. Actually, to be completely honest, I am using this topic as an excuse to address a bigger issue than this liturgy. That is, what counts in life. What counts in my relationship to God. And it just so happens that it's the same thing that counts in both our lives and this liturgy. And just so there is no beating around the bush or trickery, I will say right now that that one thing is Jesus alone. That is pretty much the entire sermon right there: Jesus. Everything from this point forward will be pointing directly at that name and lifting it up above all other things.

One way to talk about the only thing that counts is to examine what was happening to a young church a long time ago in Galatia. They church loved Jesus. They knew the gospel and they proclaimed the name of God. They held tightly to the only thing that counts, Jesus. However, not long into their life as a church some false brothers came along and started telling the church in Galatia that, yes Jesus is good, but so is circumcision. The false brothers taught that the body of Christ should rest their hope in outward appearances because circumcision was a clear sign that they were a descendant of Abraham and thus were in the saved family line. Well, it didn't take long for a missionary named Paul to hear about what was going on in Galatia and he wrote them a letter that we still have today. Here is the conclusion of that letter found in Galatians 6:

¹²Those who want to make a good impression outwardly are trying to compel you to be circumcised. The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ. ¹³Not even those who are circumcised obey the law, yet they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your flesh. ¹⁴May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which²¹ the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. ¹⁵Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation. ¹⁶Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel of God. ¹⁷Finally, let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus. ¹⁸The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit, brothers. Amen.

Initially, what we learn from this passage is that the false brothers are preaching a gospel of works to the Galatians. Works basically states that there is a God and he is a good God. He has set up a glorious and perfect law for his people as a standard of living. When someone falls short of this standard, it is called sin. Now, because God is a just God, he must punish a crime appropriately, and the Bible says that the wages of sin is death. That is, sin separates us from God for eternity. So the problem for all people is sin. Where the gospel of works comes in is that it offers a solution to this problem that is found within oneself and not Jesus Christ. The gospel of works preaches that if we can just obey the laws, then there won't be any punishment or sin. The problem with this gospel of works, though, Paul boils down to three things in the conclusion of his letter.

First, he says in verse 12, "Those who want to make a good impression outwardly are trying to compel you to be circumcised," meaning, they are seeking their own glory. They want to make a good impression to others so that everyone else can see how well they follow the law. But God deserves all glory and when men seek it for themselves, that is making themselves a God and sinning. Second, Paul continues in verse 12, "The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ." So these false brothers are fleeing from suffering for Christ. By avoiding the appropriate response

to their forgiveness on the cross, they are sinning. Third, in verse 13 Paul says, "Not even those who are circumcised obey the law, yet they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your flesh." So they are hypocrites. They tell everyone else to obey the law to find righteousness before God, but they themselves can't even do that. Essentially, what Paul is saying is that these false brothers are sinners and works doesn't work.

One more important point should be made here before we go on. Works is not about the good outweighing the bad in our lives. Works has to be about there being no sin at all, anywhere in our lives. The Bible says that if we break the law in one part we are guilty of breaking the entire law. So, briefly from this short passage so far, we can see that the function of the law is good. It shows a person their sin so that they can know they need a savior. But then after it has exposed their sin, the law sits idly and leaves a sinner helpless because the law has no power to save

So what does this mean to us today? I think it means essentially two things. One, watch out for people trying to spread false gospels in our churches. And more importantly, watch out for ourselves letting a false gospel sneak its way into our hearts. We have no claim to righteousness except through Jesus Christ. It is not about what we do, but about what he did not the cross for our sins. So when we mix the things we do with what he did for us, we get a different gospel. A false gospel. Now I understand that a lot of people in this congregation have probably already stopped listening because this is a church that preaches Jesus Christ and nothing else. I think most people here would not explicitly claim that they are resting their hope in something other than Jesus.

However, I would like to challenge us tonight to examine ourselves deeply and make sure that there is no corner of our hearts that is clinging to something other than Jesus.

Some examples of ways that we might try to unconsciously tie works into our faith would be believing in some place in our hearts that to be saved we need Jesus, but we also need to go to a really traditional church that has deep hymns and a rich history. Or how about Jesus plus a contemporary church that is very energetic and alive with the spirit? What about Jesus plus a combination of the history and depth of a traditional church and the energy and spirit of a contemporary church? What about going to church at all? When attending church becomes a way to gain the favor of God, we have missed the mark. How about Jesus plus a really long devotional time, or Jesus plus this ministry or that ministry? If we find ourselves believing that salvation depends on Jesus *plus anything*, we have endorsed a false gospel.

Now, is going to church good? Is having a devotional time good? Yes. In fact, I would say that going to church and having a good devotional time is *essential*. Not to salvation, but to any kind of good, growing walk. God designed us to be in community. We grow from accountability and being challenged and encouraged by other people. We sharpen each other in community as iron sharpens iron. But when this community becomes about more than growing in our walk and experiencing Jesus Christ. When taking part in community becomes about salvation, we have lost our way. We need to rest our hope of salvation in Jesus Christ alone and in nothing else. It is always about what he did and never about what we do.

This is one reason I have a problem with the recent What Would Jesus Do phenomenon. My problem is that when we ask that question we don't really want to

know what *would* Jesus do. We want to know what *should* we do. We know what Jesus would do. He would turn water into wine and raise people from the dead and walk on water. When we ask what would Jesus do, we are trying to figure out the character of Christ and imitate that. We want to be loving like him and forgiving like him and imitate his godly character. The problem is, this question starts with *doing* things. We can never get right before God by doing things. Nothing we do can make God love us any more or any less. Yes, doing good works is important, but not as a way to salvation. Doing good works is important exclusively as an appropriate response to the love and forgiveness God as already shown us. We should do good works, just because we want to pass on what has already been given to us. We should not try to be like Jesus. We should try to be with Jesus, and then the rest will come. If we abide in his presence first, we will be like him more. If we try to be like him first, we will fail miserably, and we will be living a false gospel.

With that being said, I would also like to warn the congregation that we need to watch our language. What I mean by this is that we talk about Christianity in terms of works all the time. Just a couple days ago I was trying to describe my roommates' walks to a friend who was thinking about living with them, and all I could do was describe what they do. I talked about how they go to Bible studies and go to church and how giving they are. The problem is, when we talk about Christianity in terms of what we do, other people, non-Christians, hear this, and Christianity becomes about works. This is not a good thing because one of two things can happen: either the non-Christian will then view Christians a people who preach a bunch of laws we all must keep, but they break them all themselves and so they are hypocrites. Nobody wants to be associated with hypocrites,

and so non-Christians are repulsed by the church. Or the second outcome from talking about Christianity in terms of what we do is that the non-Christian may actually see Christians as morally good people who uphold all the laws they preach. It is likely that most people would not feel comfortable or welcome in a setting filled with perfect people. They would think to themselves, "If these good Christians knew what I have done in my life, they would hate me and kick me out of this church," and so again talking about Christianity in terms of what we do ends up repulsing non-Christians.

Instead of talking about what we do and don't do, we should paint the picture that we all poor beggars who have freely been given food by no power of our own. We want to show others where the food is so that they might eat. Or we are horrible murderers on death row who have been freed by no power of our own, trying to show others the way to freedom. Salvation is never about what we do; it is always about what he did.

If anyone had a reason to boast in himself above the cross of Jesus Christ, it would be Paul, but in his letter to the Galatians Paul wrote, "may I never boast in anything except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ." Paul wrote in another letter, a letter to the Philippians:

If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: ⁵circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless. ⁷But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ--the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith.

We have no claim to righteousness except through Jesus Christ. If Paul, who was faultless in regard to legalistic righteousness, could see the worthlessness of works, so should we, who can call ourselves anything but faultless.

Paul goes on in his letter to the Galatians, saying, “Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; the only thing that counts is a new creation.” It is not about this denomination or that denomination or this ministry or that moral agenda or this tradition or even this liturgy. All of these things are secondary to Jesus—the only thing that counts. We seek first the new creation available only through the redeeming work of Jesus and everything else will fall into place. Aside from the fact that doing things like engaging in a certain tradition or participating in a certain ministry has no power to save us from our sins, doing these things might also be very meaningless because as we learn in Isaiah, we can honor God with our lips, but our hearts can be far from him. We can go through all the motions we want, but God does not look at our motions, he looks at our hearts. Our motions might fool other people, but we can never fool God. He wants our hearts first, not our hands. Our hands will come later, when our hearts are right, when our hearts are a new creation.

Paul continues, saying, “Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel of God.” This passage raises an interesting question, because all along I have been preaching that Paul taught Jesus alone leads to salvation and not following rules. But right here we can see that Paul is encouraging the Galatians to follow some rule. What rule is it? The rule of the new creation, and the reason Paul can encourage the Galatians to follow this rule is that this is the one rule that is not about us doing anything, but about Jesus doing everything. The rule of the new creation basically states that following rules

will not save us, we need to rest our hope of salvation in Jesus alone and let him change our hearts. This rule is about the mighty works of Jesus, not about the works of people. This rule tells us that rules can only show us how dead we are, and we need to abandon them, in order to be completely abandoned to Jesus Christ. And when we follow this rule, when we let Jesus do the work in us, Paul tells us we get peace because the battle is over. It was won when Christ rose from the dead, victorious. And we get mercy because the punishment and death we deserve we do not receive.

Finally, Paul ends his letter asking, "let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus." This is an interesting way for Paul to end his letter, because he comments on having marks of Jesus, which I imagine is what the false brothers could have called their circumcision. To fully understand what Paul is talking about let us examine what kind of marks he has exactly. In 2 Corinthians 11:23-30, we learn that Paul has been in prison, he has been flogged, exposed to death again and again, five times he received forty minus one lashes, three times he was beaten with rods, he was stoned, three times he was shipwrecked, he spent a night and a day in the open sea, he was constantly on the move, he was in danger from rivers, bandits, his own countrymen, Gentiles, in the city, in the country, at sea, and from false brothers. He labored and toiled, often went without sleep, knew hunger and thirst, often went without food, and was cold and naked. If anyone had the marks of Christ, it was Paul. The difference between Paul's marks and the false brother's marks is of utmost importance. While the false brothers inflicted marks upon themselves in order to gain righteousness, Paul had marks inflicted upon him because of his response to his righteousness he gained through

Christ. The world loves its darkness and hates the light of God. Chances are, we will be hurt in this world if we proclaim the name of Jesus boldly as we should.

So let me encourage us all to seek Jesus above all else and rest our hope of salvation in him alone. May we obtain many marks and achieve many great works, and may none of them be to our glory. May we not be deceived into resting any part of our hope in what we do, but instead may everything we do be a simple response to the Father's great love for us. Amen.

✧ **scripture**

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you who through faith are shielded by God’s power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time. (1 Peter 1:3 NIV)

✧ **closing song**

Come Thou Fount

✧ **scripture**

To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you before his glorious presence without fault and with great joy—to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority, through Jesus Christ our Lord, before all ages, now and forevermore! Amen.

(Jude 24-25)

sermon notes.



liturgical service with communion may 14, 2003
a final project by taylor swedberg

adoration.

✧ **greet**

✧ **songs of adoration**

*Thy Mercy
O Love*

✧ **scripture**

Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created; things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of his body, which is the church. He is the very beginning, the first to be raised from death, so that he would be above all others. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood shed on the cross. (Colossians 1:15-20 NIV, CEV)

Lord, because your love is better than life, our lips will glorify you.
(from Psalm 63:3 NIV)

✧ **songs of adoration**

*How Great is the Father's Love for Us
Crown Him with Many Crowns*

confession.

✧ **scripture**

God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have

fellowship with him yet walk in darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:5-10 NIV)

✧ **silence** (*for personal prayer*)

✧ **scripture**

When we were overwhelmed by sins, you forgave our transgressions. (Psalm 65:3 NIV)

✧ **prayer given by pastor**

(*includes both confession and assurance of pardon*)

assurance of pardon.

✧ **song - gospel, word**

Beautiful, Scandalous Night

proclamation.

✧ **sermon**

response.

✧ **prayer given by member of congregation**

(*includes both thanksgiving and supplication*)

✧ **scripture**

And so, dear brothers and sisters, I urge you in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion with his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully. (Romans 12:1,6-8 NIV, NLT)

✧ **offering, offering song**

Once Again

✧ **prayer (pastor)**

God, we are only giving you what you have already given us. Let our lives be living sacrifices, acted out in response to your great mercy, which you showed at the cross. It was there that your only son, our Lord, was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all like sheep have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and you, God, have laid on him the iniquity of us all. So let us pray together... (from Romans 12:1, John 3:16, Isaiah 53:5-6)

✧ **lord's prayer** (*entire body*)

Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy Name,
thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
as we forgive those
who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
and the power, and the glory,
for ever and ever. Amen.

✧ **scripture**

He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. (1 Peter 2:24)

✧ **scripture**

The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, "This is my body, which is for you; do this in remembrance of me." In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying "This cup is the new covenant of my blood, do this whenever you drink it in remembrance of me." For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes. (1 Corinthians 11:23-26 NIV)

✧ **prayer, silence, communion**

✧ **prayer, song, communion**

Just As I Am